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INTRODUCTION TO THE EMOTIONAL GRAMMAR OF PSYCHOPATHS

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Abstract. This paper proposes a naturalistic theory of moral judgment in psychopathy, grounded in Patricia Churchland's neurophilosophy and developed through the hypothesis of an emotional grammar—a cognitive-affective structure that organizes the subject's normative sensitivity. In contrast to explanations that attribute psychopathy to a mere dissociation between judgment and moral action or to a specific emotional deficit, the paper defends the thesis that such dissociation expresses a divergent form of emotional normativity, structured by an affective disposition referred to as indolent sympathy. Characterized by the combination of an intact theory of mind and a form of negative empathy, this disposition enables the psychopath to feign morality, produce normatively acceptable judgments, and act strategically without prosocial affective resonance. By integrating contributions from affective neuroscience, empirical moral psychology, and naturalistic philosophy, the paper advances a pluralistic theory of moral judgment that acknowledges the existence of functional yet morally dissonant normative architectures. By extending Churchland's framework to include non-empathic moral normativity, the paper challenges prevailing assumptions in moral philosophy and neuroethics. It suggests that agents shaped by indolent sympathy operate within an alternative normative order—functionally adaptive, affectively distinct, and socially intelligible.

Keywords: neurophilosophy • moral judgement • moral agency • normative pluralism • indolent sympathy • affective normativity

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1. Introduction

In contrast to accounts that attribute the dissociation between moral judgment and moral action in psychopaths to a dysfunction limited to the connection between emotional mechanisms and moral reasoning, this article advances the hypothesis that such dissociation reflects an alternative form of emotional normativity, structured by a divergent emotional grammar. While authors such as Cima et al. (2010), Glenn et al. (2010), Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong, and Kiehl (2012), Schaich Borg et al. (2013), and Tassy et al. (2013) contend that the psychopath's moral judgments are normatively adequate yet lack motivational force, this paper argues that many of these

judgments are, in fact, second-order moral judgments—strategic formulations based on the psychopath's awareness of the social norms prevalent in their environment (cf. Viding 2019, p.67).

By contrast, first-order moral judgments—those grounded in authentic affective dispositions—are expressed through the consistency between evaluative attitudes and behavior in morally relevant contexts. From this perspective, a psychopath's true moral judgment regarding a given event should be inferred primarily from their typical behavioral patterns in analogous situations, rather than from verbal articulations, which often reveal a marked disengagement from prosocial affect.

This hypothesis is further developed through the notion of *indolent sympathy* (Tovar 2022), a non-prosocial affective disposition grounded in a combination of an intact Theory of Mind (Blair et al. 1996; Dolan & Fullam 1999; Richell et al. 2003; Young et al., 2012) and a form of *negative empathy* (Bloom 2017; Decety 2021). This configuration enables psychopaths to accurately recognize others' emotional states without experiencing a corresponding sympathetic or prosocial response.

From this perspective, the moral judgment of the psychopath is neither simply devoid of emotion, as might be inferred from Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model, nor the outcome of a conflict between emotion and reason, as proposed by Greene's (2013) dual-process theory. Rather, it *emerges*—for the concept of emergence as used in this paper, see Morales (2023)—from an alternative emotional architecture—a divergent *emotional grammar*—that supports specific forms of moral judgment and action oriented toward social adaptability or strategic instrumentalization.

Churchland's neurophilosophical approach (1986, 2011, 2019) is particularly well suited to understanding this configuration—not as the outcome of isolated modules or rigid systems, but as the expression of a dynamic co-evolution between brain, affect, and social practices in the genesis of moral judgment.

In this context, prevailing theories in the field can be broadly categorized into two camps. The first argues that psychopaths retain the cognitive competence to make normatively acceptable moral judgments, but lack the affective motivation to act accordingly (Cima et al. 2010; Glenn et al. 2010; Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong, & Kiehl 2012; Tassy et al. 2013).

The second, advanced by authors such as Cleckley (1941/1982), Hare (1999), Blair (1995, 1996), Koenigs et al. (2012), and Young et al. (2012), contends—albeit with certain nuances—that moral judgment in psychopaths is superficial, mimetic, and devoid of authentic normative value due to emotional disengagement. Underlying both positions is a more fundamental debate about the nature of moral judgment itself: whether it should be conceived as a purely cognitive competence or as a capacity necessarily integrated with affective systems that confer motivational force and normative authenticity.

In meta-ethical terms, psychopathy has fueled an ongoing debate between inter-

nalists and externalists regarding the relationship between moral judgment and motivation. From an internalist standpoint, Smith (1994) argues that making a genuine moral judgment entails, under normal conditions, being motivated to act accordingly. Although Smith does not explicitly address psychopathy, his framework implies that the absence of motivation undermines the authenticity of the moral judgment itself. In contrast, externalist perspectives, such as that of Roskies (2003), contend that psychopaths are capable of issuing outwardly appropriate moral judgments without corresponding motivation, thereby suggesting that motivation is contingent rather than constitutive of moral judgment.

Kennett and Fine (2008) offer a nuanced contribution to this debate. While they acknowledge that psychopaths are capable of articulating moral norms, they argue that such judgements lack authenticity because they fail to integrate the affective responses necessary for genuine normative commitment. In this sense, they defend an empirically sensitive version of internalism.

By contrast, Prinz (2007), writing from a constructivist sentimentalist and externalist standpoint, maintains that moral judgements are constituted by emotional dispositions acquired through social learning. On this view, the moral deficits observed in psychopathy stem not from a failure of rationality, but from an affective deficiency—specifically, the inability to experience moral emotions such as guilt, empathy, or indignation.

Thus, psychopathy represents a privileged case for investigating the affective and motivational foundations of moral cognition.

However, interpretations grounded in modular, dual-process, or strictly functionalist[1] frameworks often presuppose the existence of a canonical form of moral judgement—one structured around affective dispositions such as compassion, harm aversion, and inhibitory control over aggression. This assumption implies that departures from this model should be interpreted as deficits or dysfunctions.

Challenging this perspective, it is worth asking whether the moral architecture of the psychopath reflects not merely a deficiency, but—more radically—an alternative normative configuration, underpinned by a functionally adaptive reorganization of affective systems.

This paper develops this possibility by arguing that psychopathy should not be understood merely as an impairment of moral motivation, but rather as a normatively distinct configuration, underpinned by *indolent sympathy* (Tovar 2022)—an affective disposition that enables instrumental forms of interpersonal recognition without neurotypical affective engagement. Rather than being devoid of moral judgement, the psychopath may operate within an emotional architecture calibrated to detect and exploit vulnerabilities, in which emotional recognition serves strategic rather than empathic functions.

This perspective reframes the dissociation between judgment and action not as a

failure of moral capacity, but as evidence of a structurally distinct emotional architecture—one attuned not to empathy, but to strategic manipulation. To interpret this divergence as a "deficit" is to assume a partial—and potentially biased—conception of morality rooted exclusively in prosocial affect. This hypothesis invites a reconsideration of the philosophical status of the psychopath—not as a marginal or failed moral agent, but as a functional expression of a structurally distinct moral architecture, intelligible within the naturalistic framework advanced by Churchland (1986 2011).

To develop this hypothesis, the paper first offers a critical review of contemporary models that explain the dissociation between moral judgement and moral action in psychopaths, with particular emphasis on the contributions of Cleckley, Hare, Blair, Nichols, Haidt, Greene, Cima, Koenigs, and Young.

Second, it articulates the concept of *emotional grammar* through Patricia Churchland's naturalistic neurophilosophical framework, in order to elucidate the affective architecture underlying atypical—yet functionally coherent—forms of moral normativity.

Third, it introduces the category of *indolent sympathy* as an emergent affective substrate that supports an alternative mode of moral agency, characterized by the instrumentalization of others in the absence of neurotypical empathic resonance.

This proposal transcends the deficit model, suggesting that psychopathy reflects a normative configuration structured by a functionally effective emotional sensitivity—one oriented not toward prosocial engagement but toward strategic manipulation.

From this perspective, neurophilosophy enables us to transcend the dichotomy between a "typical" morality and a psychopathy understood merely as dysfunction. It opens the way for a pluralistic and comparative analysis of moral architectures within a naturalistic framework of mind, emotion, and behavior.

2. Foundations

2.1. Moral judgement and emotion: contemporary perspectives

Since the late twentieth century, moral psychology has moved beyond rationalist models, emphasizing the foundational role of emotion in generating and regulating moral judgement (see Tovar & Ostrosky 2013, pp.1–3). This affective turn is supported by a wide range of empirical findings and theoretical models showing that moral evaluations often arise from automatic, intuitive, and emotionally charged processes, instead of deliberative and conscious reasoning (see Tovar & Ostrosky, 2013, pp.20–23).

Jonathan Haidt (2001), for example, proposes the social intuitionist model, which holds that moral judgements arise as immediate intuitive responses, while reasoning

functions primarily as a post hoc tool for constructing justifications after the judgement has already occurred (see Tovar & Ostrosky 2013, pp.27–28).

In contrast, Joshua Greene (2013), in his dual-process theory, distinguishes between a fast, emotion-driven deontological system and a slower, deliberative utilitarian system. He argues that the interaction between these systems explains the psychological tension observed in classical moral dilemmas (see Tovar & Ostrosky 2013, pp.54–59).

Empirical research supports these theoretical models by showing the involvement of brain structures such as the amygdala, ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), posterior superior temporal sulcus, insula, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) in evaluating morally salient situations (Hiser & Koenigs 2018; Jung et al. 2016; Greene et al. 2001).

The central implication of these findings is that moral judgement cannot be understood apart from the affective processes that generate or modulate it. This marks a significant departure from traditional rationalist theories—such as those of Kant, Rawls, or Kohlberg—that situate morality primarily within the domain of practical reason.

Emotion-based models have proven especially fruitful in the study of psychopathy—a condition in which the capacity to articulate normatively acceptable moral judgements coexists with persistent antisocial, manipulative, and guiltless behavior.

James Blair (1995, 1996), for example, contends that psychopaths exhibit dysfunction in the violence inhibition mechanism, impairing emotional responses such as compassion and guilt when confronted with others' suffering (see Tovar & Ostrosky 2013, 8–12). This absence of moral emotions is believed to undermine not only the motivation to act morally but also the very formation of genuine moral judgement.

Shaun Nichols (2004) argues that moral judgment is grounded in what he terms *sentimental rules*—a synthesis of socially acquired norms and innate affective responses. In the absence of such affective responses—as seen in psychopathy—moral judgement is deprived of motivational force and loses its capacity for behavioral regulation (see Tovar & Ostrosky 2013, 16–21).

Empirical studies by Cima, Tonnaer, and Hauser (2010) and Koenigs et al. (2012) support this view, demonstrating that while psychopaths can distinguish between moral and conventional norms and articulate seemingly appropriate moral judgements, these do not reliably translate into moral behavior.

These perspectives share the hypothesis that, without an operative emotional substrate, moral judgments become verbal or performative, lacking the capacity to effectively guide behavior.

This evolving theoretical landscape has prompted a reconsideration of traditional philosophical categories related to moral judgement, particularly the interplay between cognition, emotion, and motivation (see Tovar & Ostrosky 2013, p.63).

Despite their important contributions, however, many of these models continue to rely on modular or dualistic conceptions of moral functioning—such as the opposition between automatic emotional systems and rational deliberative processes—which do not always adequately reflect the complexity of the neural dynamics underpinning the generation of moral judgements and behaviors.

In this regard, Patricia Churchland's neurophilosophical framework (1986, 2011) offers an alternative conceptual model that rejects traditional mind/body and reason/emotion dichotomies. Instead, it advances an integrative perspective in which moral judgement emerges from the dynamic co-evolution of neural systems, shaped by affective, social, and contextual factors (2011, pp.9, 125, 166).

Rather than positing specialized modules for morality, Churchland emphasizes the role of broader neural systems—such as those governing attachment, aversion, and pain regulation—in the development of moral capacities. She further argues that detailed neuroscientific knowledge is essential to any robust understanding of the human moral architecture (Churchland 2011, pp.8, 16, 28, 46).

From this standpoint, psychopathy is not merely the result of deficits in discrete mechanisms, but rather the manifestation of a divergent affective and neurocognitive configuration that challenges conventional normative models of moral judgment (Churchland 2011, pp.40–42).

2.2. The psychopath as a challenge to moral cognition

The case of psychopathy has taken a central role in contemporary debates on moral judgement, not only because of its clinical and forensic relevance but also due to its capacity to challenge foundational assumptions in moral philosophy.

Since Hervey Cleckley's seminal work *The Mask of Sanity* (1941/1982), the psychopath has been portrayed as someone capable of articulating moral judgements that align with prevailing social norms—often with striking eloquence—while exhibiting profound affective irresponsibility, persistent antisocial conduct, and a marked absence of remorse.

This clinical profile challenges a key premise of metaethical internalism (Smith 1994): that genuine moral judgement necessarily entails a motivation to act accordingly. Cleckley famously described such individuals as *mimicking emotion without actually feeling it* (1941/1982, p.374); their moral judgements are formally correct yet devoid of affective substance.

Psychopathy, in this sense, functions as a borderline condition that destabilizes the traditional link between moral cognition, motivation, and behavior. It compels us to reconsider whether moral judgement can be ontologically separated from the capacity to experience moral emotions such as guilt, remorse, or compassion.

Cleckley's clinical description was later systematized by Robert D. Hare (1991,

1999, 2003), who developed the *Psychopathy Checklist–Revised* (PCL-R), a widely validated diagnostic instrument that defines psychopathy in terms of a cluster of interpersonal, affective, and behavioral traits.[2] These include pronounced egocentrism, manipulativeness, superficial charm, lack of empathy, affective detachment, irresponsibility, and promiscuity, among others (for a critical reading of this clinical construct, see Jalava, Griffiths, & Maraun 2015).

According to Hare, a defining feature of psychopathy is the ability to articulate moral norms without these formulations exerting meaningful influence on behavior. Psychopaths may anticipate the potential consequences of their actions; yet their emotional deficit prevents them from inhibiting harmful or antisocial conduct (Hare 1999, p.143).

Subsequent research has refined this characterization. Although psychopaths show difficulty distinguishing clearly between moral and conventional norms (Blair 1995; Blair, Mitchell, & Blair 2005; Glenn et al. 2009), the core impairment appears to lie in their diminished emotional arousal in response to others' suffering (Young et al. 2012). This deficit compromises both moral motivation and the ability to generate genuinely normative moral judgments[3] (Koenigs et al. 2012; Decety et al. 2013).

Thus, psychopathy does not entail a cognitive deficit in the conventional sense but rather a dissociation between the propositional formulation of moral judgment and the affective response that typically undergirds it. Some interpret this dissociation as evidence that moral judgment can function independently at a purely cognitive level (Cima et al. 2010). Others argue that when such judgments are divorced from congruent emotional anchoring, they lack normative authenticity (Nichols 2004, pp.111-113; Kennett & Fine 2008, p 175).

The rise of neurocognitive approaches has facilitated deeper investigation into the neural underpinnings of this dissociation. Antonio Damasio's (1994) somatic marker hypothesis posits that moral decision-making relies on emotionally salient bodily signals—somatic markers—which are shaped by experience and processed through specific neural circuits. These markers operate as affective heuristics, biasing and constraining the range of available options in a manner that facilitates rapid, context-sensitive judgment, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. According to Damasio, such signals are not peripheral to reason but constitute an essential component of practical reasoning. Psychopathy, from this angle, reflects a diminished capacity to generate or integrate somatic markers. Consequently, the psychopath may produce structurally coherent moral judgments that are affectively inert and normatively unmoored.

Building on this perspective, Greene et al. (2001, 2004) demonstrated that deontological moral judgments—such as the refusal to cause direct harm—are associated with heightened activation in brain areas tied to affective processing. These include the amygdala, central to emotional responses to harm; the precuneus, involved in

moral self-awareness; and the mPFC, which supports emotional evaluation and moral cognition.

In contrast, utilitarian moral judgments predominantly recruit areas implicated in controlled reasoning and executive regulation, such as the DLPFC and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). The ACC, in particular, facilitates conflict detection and integrates emotional and cognitive information during moral deliberation (for a critical view, see Tovar, In press).

In individuals with psychopathy, studies report reduced ACC activation during morally salient decision-making—especially those involving deceit or harm—suggesting a weakened capacity for internal conflict and affective resonance (Abe, Greene, & Kiehl 2018; Glenn, Raine, & Schug 2009).

Extending research by Damasio and Greene, further studies have explored patients with damage to the vmPFC, a region also implicated in psychopathy. vmPFC-lesioned patients can produce normatively appropriate moral judgments in hypothetical scenarios, yet often exhibit socially inappropriate or morally transgressive behaviors in real life (Bechara et al. 1997; Koenigs et al. 2007; Ciaramelli et al. 2007).

In this vein, Koenigs et al. (2012) found that individuals with psychopathy are more likely to endorse utilitarian responses in personal moral dilemmas, indicating reduced emotional sensitivity to instrumental harm. This pattern aligns functionally with vmPFC lesion profiles. Similarly, Liane Young et al. (2012) suggest that psychopaths retain an intact Theory of Mind—allowing them to grasp others' intentions and beliefs—but lack the affective resonance required for morally motivated behavior.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the dissociation between moral judgment and behavior in psychopathy stems not from a general cognitive failure, but from dysfunction in the emotional mechanisms that bind normative understanding to motivation. Psychopaths may articulate formally adequate moral judgments, but their atypical affective architecture undermines these judgments' capacity to regulate behavior. What emerges is a divergent integration between cognition, emotion, and morality.

However, this interpretation is contested by both metaethical internalists (Smith 1994; Rosati 2016) and naturalistic neurophilosophers, who question whether moral judgment can be functionally separated from emotion. Patricia Churchland (2011, pp.12, 16, 40), for instance, argues that moral judgments depend on a neural architecture evolved to promote social cohesion via affective bonding and cooperation. From this standpoint, moral judgments lacking emotional modulation—as seen in psychopathy—lack the neurobiological grounding of human morality.

Decety (2014, 2021) likewise emphasizes that empathy, integrated with other socio-emotional skills, is crucial for moral judgment. When this integration is disrupted, as in psychopathy, moral judgment becomes dysfunctional, lacking the affec-

tive scaffolding needed to guide behavior meaningfully.

Therefore, it is insufficient to claim that psychopaths 'judge well but do not act morally'. One must ask whether their moral judgements reflect genuine normative commitment or merely a strategic simulation of prevailing social norms. This raises the possibility that such judgments are not unmotivated but shaped by a divergent affective architecture—capable of supporting atypical yet internally coherent modes of moral evaluation. Instead of treating these deviations strictly as deficits, we might consider whether they constitute a non-canonical form of moral judgment: one less anchored in harm aversion and compassion, and more attuned to alternative, adaptive dimensions of social interaction.

Patricia Churchland's (1986, 2011, 2019) approach systematically integrates neuroscience, psychology and moral philosophy into a co-evolutionary framework that links brain structures, affective processes, and social norms. She argues that moral evaluations emerge from neural systems evolved to support cooperation, attachment, and conflict resolution.

In this model, emotions are not peripheral to moral judgement, they are integral to its neurofunctional architecture. Rejecting classical reason/emotion dichotomies, Churchland advances a naturalized account of morality in which such distinctions are seen as theoretical abstractions, inadequate for capturing the brain's complexity.

This perspective is supported by findings in cognitive neuroscience, which challenge the classical dichotomy between reason and emotion by demonstrating that brain regions traditionally associated with "cognitive" functions also participate in affective processing. Davidson (2000, 2003) has shown that areas such as the prefrontal cortex are involved not only in reasoning but also in emotional regulation, thereby undermining the viability of a strict functional separation between these domains. Similarly, Pessoa (2008) advances a *multi-pathway model* that integrates cortical and subcortical circuits in the processing of emotional stimuli. In a further elaboration, Pessoa (2022) argues that brain systems should not be divided into discrete cognitive and emotional modules, but rather understood as dynamically entangled networks in which perceptual, affective, and cognitive processes are deeply interwoven. Instead of assigning isolated functions to specific regions, he proposes a view of the brain as a complex, distributed and highly interconnected system.

Viewed through this lens, psychopathy offers a paradigmatic case for evaluating the explanatory reach of neurophilosophy. It enables the study of how variations in neuroaffective structure reshape moral functioning without appealing to essentialist or purely rationalist models. Churchland (2011) maintains that morality does not constitute a discrete faculty but emerges from neural systems underpinning empathy, harm aversion, social anticipation, and emotional bonding.

Studies have documented functional anomalies in psychopathy in brain areas like the amygdala, orbitofrontal cortex, vmPFC, and insula (Kiehl, 2006; Decety et

al. 2013; Glenn, Raine & Schug 2009; Craig et al., 2009)–regions tied to threat detection, guilt evaluation, impulse regulation, and social decision-making.

LeDoux (1996), Damasio (1994, 1996), Greene (2013), and Decety (2021) have pointed out that emotional processing not only modulates but contributes to moral judgement through mechanisms like empathy, harm aversion and norm internalization. Churchland (2011, pp.33–41) maintains that such mechanisms evolved to address challenges related to cooperation, group life, and caregiving. Their disruption in psychopathy signals not mere moral insensitivity but a reconfiguration of motivational and normative architectures.

From the neurophilosophical perspective, psychopathy is not simply a moral anomaly but a divergent configuration that illuminates the structural interdependence of affect, cognition, and normative agency.

The philosophical import of Churchland's naturalism lies in its reconceptualization of moral judgement as an emergent function of biologically grounded systems that support complex social life. This shift allows us to reinterpret psychopathy not only in terms of dysfunction but as an alternative affective configuration—a divergent architecture that, under certain environmental or social conditions, may serve adaptive functions.

Unlike rationalist theories that define moral judgement as the exercise of practical reason governed by universal principles (Kant 1785/1996; Rawls 1971), the naturalistic approach sees normativity as an emergent phenomenon rooted in affective dispositions, empathic capacities, and socially learned neural patterns. From this vantage, psychopathy is not merely an exception but an empirically tractable instance of how affective and neurobiological variability shape divergent forms of moral evaluation and behavior.

As Churchland (2011, pp.10, 12, 27) argues, understanding how neural circuits assign value, shape affective responses, process interpersonal stimuli, and sustain cooperative behavior is essential for developing a biology-based theory of moral judgment.

This research contributes to that naturalistic programme by analyzing psychopathy not as the result of an emotional vacuum, but as the expression of an alternative form of emotional grammar. In doing so, it seeks to broaden the field of neuroethics and promote a pluralistic, empirically informed, and neurocognitively sound moral philosophy.

3. Conceptual innovations

3.1. Psychopathy and second-order moral judgement

Contemporary research often characterizes the moral judgments of individuals with psychopathy as cognitively intact but lacking affective resonance—a deficit presumed to account for their limited role in regulating behavior. However, such descriptions frequently assume that the moral statements made by psychopaths—e.g., "lying is wrong" or "one should not harm others"—carry the same normative force as those of neurotypical individuals. In contrast, I propose a conceptual distinction between first-order and second-order moral judgments.

First-order moral judgments arise from affective dispositions genuinely committed to their evaluative content; they are motivationally linked to action and reflect internalized normativity. They correspond to what we have previously described as genuinely normative moral judgments. Second-order moral judgments, by contrast, are learned or mimetic expressions that align with social conventions but may be articulated without neurotypical emotional engagement or behavioral commitment.

In this sense, the psychopath does not judge from moral conviction but reproduces what they anticipate will garner social approval. This distinction helps explain why individuals with psychopathy may display apparent normative competence while persistently engaging in immoral behavior: their judgements simulate moral conformity rather than expressing authentic normativity.

The idea that psychopaths can make moral judgements without normative commitment is not novel; traditionally it has been seen as a motivational or affective deficit impeding the translation of judgement into action (Blair 2007; Glenn, Raine and Schug 2009; Cima, Tonnaer and Hauser 2010).

The hypothesis of second-order moral judgement advanced here seeks to move beyond this deficit model by framing these judgements not as flawed, but as functional products of an alternative moral cognition. These utterances do not convey genuine normative beliefs but function as strategic speech acts (Austin 1962), intended to achieve adaptive aims such as avoiding sanctions, gaining approval, and enabling manipulation (Cameron, Conway, & Scheffer 2022).[4]

Reframing the psychopath's moral judgements as second-order judgements allows a shift from a purely dysfunctional view to a structural understanding of their affective and normative architecture. Instead of conceiving the psychopath as a deficient moral agent—able to formulate moral judgements but lacking the motivation to act on them—this perspective considers them as subjects whose normativity is organized around a motivational system not oriented toward cooperation or prosocial ends.

The divergence thus lies not in the absence of moral capacity, but in a motivational

architecture adapted to alternative social goals, such as manipulation, instrumentalization, or dominance.

Accordingly, I propose that the psychopath's moral judgments are rooted in an affective disposition I have termed *indolent sympathy* (Tovar-Bohórquez 2022). A sentiment that enables psychopaths to present themselves as charismatic, to accurately interpret the emotions of others, and to appear genuinely concerned for others' well-being, despite lacking authentic empathy engagement. Their behavior reflects not genuine sympathy, but a form of agreeable mimicry geared toward manipulation rather than compassion.

In its most perverse form, indolent sympathy manifests as an affective disposition inclined toward brutality—understood here as crude, harsh or cruel—in situations where compassion would typically be expected. Brutality, as an expression of indolent sympathy, does not signal an absence of affect but a distorted form of emotional engagement—a perverse substitute for compassion, embedded in a divergent emotional grammar. The term brutality is used here to denote the presence of a morally disfigured affective response—one in which the capacity to recognize another's suffering is preserved, yet decoupled from any prosocial or regulatory function. Rather than arising from care, brutality emerges from a reorganized emotional disposition oriented toward control rather than concern.

In this context: crude indicates an emotionally coarse, normatively unrefined reaction—a form of judgment marked by the absence of moral calibration. Harsh signals a severe and affectively unmodulated response to vulnerability—particularly in contexts where sensitivity would be expected. Cruel refers to the instrumentalization or toleration of suffering without internal moral conflict.

These distinctions reflect one of the central ideas of this article: that brutality, within the psychopathic profile, is not merely a passive failure of empathy, but an active replacement of compassion by an alternative, functionally coherent yet morally deviant emotional architecture. This perverse emotional grammar sustains a mode of moral agency that is not affectively void, but rather attuned to manipulation, dominance, and instrumental control—revealing the plasticity, and potential dangers, of affective normativity when decoupled from prosocial constraint.

The moral and social implications of this emotional reconfiguration are exemplified by public figures who conceal predatory behavior behind moral façades. A paradigmatic case is that of the priest who, while publicly revered, commits heinous acts such as paedophilia. This individual maintains a public persona of moral integrity while perpetrating private atrocities (Barrientos 2019, 2021, 2023). Similarly, psychopaths exploit their charisma to simulate concern, manipulating not only individuals but entire communities. Their ability to commit brutal acts while avoiding sanctions is often enabled by their skill in emotional camouflage.

The likelihood of punishment often correlates with the environment in which

they were socialized: more precarious developmental contexts increase the chance of apprehension.

This idea aligns with findings that psychopaths show no cognitive Theory of Mind deficits (Richell et al. 2003; Dolan & Fullam 2004; Young et al. 2012; Vonk et al. 2015), but instead display a disconnect between recognizing mental states and the affective resonance that typically accompanies such recognition (Viding & McCrory 2012; Decety, Skelly & Kiehl 2013; Winter et al. 2017).

This dissociation allows psychopaths to manipulate others, simulate moral concern, and evade social sanctions without genuine emotional engagement. Cognitive empathy remains intact, but affective empathy—on which prosocial sympathy and, by extension, guilt, compassion, and the inhibition of violence depend—is impaired or reorganized.

This emotional profile is consistent with Patricia Churchland's (2011) model, which holds that moral dispositions emerge from neural systems evolved for affiliation, emotional regulation, and social learning. These systems support cooperation and group cohesion.

Indolent sympathy illustrates how divergent affective dispositions can repurpose these systems toward manipulation and control rather than empathy and reciprocity.

This atypical form of normativity does not contradict Churchland's naturalism. Rather, it extends it by showing that moral architecture of the human brain can take functionally adaptive forms beyond prosocial configurations.

Recognizing that psychopaths' moral judgments often stem from indolent sympathy enables a reframing of psychopathy. Rather than asking whether they *lack* moral judgement (Blair 1995; Hare 1999; Cleckley, 1941/1982), or are merely unmotivated to act on it (Tassy et al. 2013; Glenn et al. 2010; Cima et al. 2010; Viding & McCrory 2019), this perspective opens the possibility that their judgements are shaped by a divergent emotional normativity. This normativity is not inherently dysfunctional, but functionally adapted to a social logic based on manipulation, dominance, and instrumentalization.

This proposal aligns with Churchland's (2011) thesis that moral judgment results from neural systems evolved to support cooperative social life. In the case of psychopathy, these systems appear reorganized to sustain effective social agency devoid of compassion or reciprocity.

This perspective invites a broader re-examination of morality: not as a fixed set of rules, but as an emergent product of internalized emotional grammar structuring normative sensibility.

The next section elaborates on this notion of emotional grammar as a theoretical framework for integrating second-order moral judgment, indolent sympathy, and affective variability into a pluralistic theory of moral agency.

3.2. Emotional grammar and the affective architecture of psychopathy

The notion of *emotional grammar* presents a structural yet plastic conception of moral development, compatible with neuroscientific findings and interactionist models. Rather than operating as a closed module or a rigid programme for moral processing, emotional grammar functions as an organized dispositional system that depends on social mediation for its effective realization.

As Tomasello (2016, p.156) observes, human moral development cannot be understood apart from the cultural practices through which individuals learn to coordinate intentions, share normative expectations, and regulate behavior within intersubjective contexts. In his model, early prosocial dispositions—such as sympathy and fairness—are transformed through affective attachment and cultural instruction into internalized forms of normative regulation that enable participation in morally structured communities.

Patricia Churchland (2011, pp.16, 30) similarly argues that human morality is rooted in a neurobiological platform sculpted by evolution to support attachment, care, and cooperation. She emphasizes the platform's plasticity—its openness to modification via experience, social learning, and the cultural institutions that shape normative practices.

Flanagan (2017) also conceives the human mind as a psychobiologically grounded yet culturally plastic system, whose affective, cognitive, and normative dispositions are shaped and reshaped through forms of life, self-reflective critique, and moral imagination. This plasticity not only facilitates adaptation to environmental demands, but also allows for the deliberate transformation of inherited moral frameworks. In a complementary vain, Jesse Prinz (2007) contends that moral emotions are not innate universal, but are culturally constructed from more basic affective mechanisms.

Consistent with these perspectives, the emotional grammar model acknowledges a shared neurocognitive substrate but holds that specific forms of moral agency—including divergent expressions such as indolent sympathy—emerge from structural variations modulated by environmental factors, rather than from localized neural deficits. This framework avoids both biological reductionism and normative idealism by situating moral judgement at the intersection of biology, affectivity, culture and agency.

The hypothesis that morality is anchored in emotional grammar extends the naturalistic account of moral judgement. Instead of viewing morality as the product of a specialized faculty or abstract reasoning, this model posits that moral judgement emerges from a general neurocognitive system that structures the subject's affective and social dispositions in a systematic, coherent, and functionally adaptive manner.

Drawing inspiration from Chomsky's analogy of universal grammar (Chomsky 1965), this approach aligns with the framework advanced by John Mikhail (2011),

who argues that humans possess an innate capacity to make complex moral distinctions based on implicit principles that operate as a universal moral grammar.

While Mikhail's proposal offers a robust formal and computational model for describing the structure of moral judgment—through principles such as the Principle of Double Effect, the Rescue Principle, and the distinction between intention and consequence—it does not explicitly address the affective or somatic components of moral intuition. This omission is consistent with Mikhail's aim to characterize the competence underlying moral cognition—i.e., the implicit knowledge structure that enables individuals to make consistent moral judgments—rather than the performance systems that implement these judgments through real-time affective and neural processes.

The *emotional grammar* proposed here does not contradict Mikhail's account but complements it by operating at a different level of analysis. Drawing on affective and cognitive neuroscience (Damasio 1994; Churchland 2011), this proposal integrates neurobiological and somatic elements into moral performance, while remaining structurally compatible with Mikhail's computational formalism.[5]

Such integration broadens the explanatory reach of moral grammar theory within a naturalistic paradigm that incorporates embodiment, emotional activation, and environmental modulation. Conceived in this way, emotional grammar functions as an adaptive neurocognitive scaffold that regulates the interaction among situational perception, affective salience, and normative evaluation.

Conceived heuristically rather than predictively, the analogy with Chomsky's universal grammar serves to illuminate how a shared cognitive-affective structure underlies both the universality of certain moral intuitions—as expressions of common neurocognitive architecture—and their variability across individuals. Just as the grammar of language underpins a wide range of particular languages, emotional grammar structures the diverse affective configurations from which different forms of moral agency emerge. These configurations, shaped by developmental and neurological factors, may yield divergent forms of normativity, including those observed in individuals with psychopathic traits or socio-affective developmental disorders (Frick & Viding 2009; Blair 2005; Kiehl 2006).

In this context, I define *emotional grammar* as the cognitive-affective system underlying moral development, enabling normative capacities to emerge from structurally organized affective dispositions. It should not be understood as a set of explicit rules, but as an implicit, evolutionarily shaped structure that organizes how individuals emotionally experience, encode, and respond to their own and others' actions.

Its function is analogous to Chomsky's (1965) concept of generative grammar: it operates tacitly, is universally distributed across the human species, and generates normative expressions from foundational structural elements—which, in this case,

are affective rather than linguistic.

At its core, emotional grammar comprises mechanisms such as imitation, harm aversion, and basic emotions,[6] all of which have been evolutionarily selected for their adaptive role in survival (Ekman 1992; Panksepp 1998; Damasio 1999).

These foundational elements are integrated through social interaction, facilitating the emergence of higher-order socio-cognitive capacities such as empathy (Decety & Jackson 2004), theory of mind (Premack & Woodruff 1978; Frith & Frith 2006; Brüne & Brüne-Cohrs 2006) or sympathy.

As Darwall (2002) explains, sympathy differs from empathy in that it does not require adopting the other's perspective; rather, it involves responding from a position of care. As he puts it: "Sympathy for someone [...] is felt, not as from her standpoint, but as from the perspective of someone (anyone) caring for her" (p.3).

Sympathy thus constitutes an affective disposition evaluatively oriented toward the other as someone who matters in themselves. Emotional grammar develops into increasingly complex forms of moral sensitivity (Tovar, 2011, p.141), encompassing moral emotions such as guilt, shame, indignation, compassion, and the gradual internalization of social norms, which function as internal regulators of behavior (Tangney et al. 2007; Spinrad et al. 2023).

Although emotional grammar structures moral development, its expression is neither uniform nor invariant. Just as the universal grammar manifests in diverse natural languages, emotional grammar can be articulated through a varied affective configuration shaped by individual biology, socialization, and neurobiological trajectories.

This variability offers an explanatory framework for both the cultural diversity of moral sensitivities and the emergence of atypical forms of moral agency, such as those observed in individuals with psychopathic traits or socio-affective developmental disorders (Tomasello 2016, pp. 109, 156–157; Decety 2021; Frick & Viding 2009).

In such individuals, emotional grammar is not absent but reorganized: dispositions like harm aversion and compassion may be attenuated, while capacities such as intentional recognition, cognitive empathy, or negative empathy may remain intact or be enhanced (Prinz 2011; Viding & McCrory 2012; Koenigs et al. 2012; Young et al. 2012; Decety & Cowell 2014; Bloom 2017; Breithaupt 2018; Decety 2021).

This reorganization explains how individuals may issue morally acceptable moral judgements without experiencing the emotions that typically support them, or engage in brutal actions without moral conflict.

In such cases as psychopathy, prosocial sympathy does not take root. Instead, a form of *indolent sympathy* emerges: an affective disposition (Deonna & Teroni 2012, p.8) characterized by the capacity to experience collective non-prosocial—or even brutal—emotions in response to the suffering of others, irrespective of the victim's condition.

This affective disposition arises from the combination of an intact—or even hyper-

developed—Theory of Mind (Frith & Frith 2006; Young, 2012; Viding & McCrory 2019), which underpins instrumental cognitive empathy, and a form of negative empathy (Prinz 2011; Bloom 2017; Breithaupt 2018; Decety 2021), in which sensitivity to others' emotional states fails to foster care or prosocial concern. Rather than triggering moral inhibition, the recognition of others' suffering may paradoxically reinforce emotionally dysregulated, domineering, or strategically exploitative behavior (Cameron, Conway & Scheffer 2022).

Unlike prosocial sympathy, which typically facilitates emotional regulation and morally oriented behavior, indolent sympathy leads to brutality: a form of crude, harsh, or cruel judgment and behavior in the face of another's suffering. Its intentionality is determined by the non-prosocial collective emotions that are activated in the face of another's vulnerability.

In sum, *emotional grammar* provides a model of moral development that integrates biological, cognitive, affective and social dimensions. Its structural character and plasticity allow for the understanding of varied normative trajectories and underscores the foundational role of affective dispositions in the formation—or deformation—of moral agency.

Within this framework, *indolent sympathy* emerges as a paradigmatic expression of how the reorganization of emotional grammar can give rise to functional, though not prosocial, forms of normativity. That is, it illustrates how alternative affective configurations may sustain normative structures that are internally coherent and socially operative, yet decoupled from conventional prosocial motivations. Without appealing to localized deficits or the loss of empathic capacity, this disposition reveals the possibility of divergent normative agency—characterized not by sensitivity to the other, but by sensitivity to their instrumentalization.

This allows for a more explicit elucidation of the relationship between emotional grammar, indolent sympathy and the distinctive form of moral judgement exhibited in psychopathy. Emotional grammar provides the structural basis for organizing affective dispositions, while indolent sympathy emerges from this grammar and supports the generation of second-order moral judgements characteristic of psychopaths. These judgements, though normatively intelligible, lack the motivational basis characteristic of prosocial moral architectures. Thus, moral judgement in psychopathy emerges not from the absence of moral capacity, but from a restructured emotional grammar oriented towards strategic engagement rather than empathic attunement. This articulation between emotional grammar, indolent sympathy and moral judgement enables us to understand how functionally coherent yet ethically divergent moral agencies can be grounded in affective configurations that depart from canonical forms of normativity.

This interpretation finds further support in Patricia Churchland's (2011) neurophilosophical framework, which situates moral cognition within the adaptive dy-

namics of neural systems. Drawing on her perspective, one can argue that the neuronal systems underpinning morality are not static or inherently prosocial, but adaptive and plastic—capable of supporting a variety of normative configurations, some oriented toward care and cooperation, others toward control, dominance, or instrumental manipulation of others. To further develop this possibility, the following section examines in greater detail the structure and normative function of *indolent sympathy*, as well as its role in shaping alternative forms of moral agency.

3.3. Indolent sympathy and divergent agency

Recent research challenging traditional dysfunction-based explanations of psychopathy support the hypothesis of a divergent affective disposition, such as *indolent sympathy*. In a systematic review, Deming, Griffiths, Jalava, Koenigs and Larsen (2024) analyzed 1,573 functional and structural neuroimaging studies examining the relationship between psychopathy and the mPFC —including areas the vmPFC, dmPFC, and ACC—and found that 85.4 % of the reported effects were null.

This trend is not an isolated anomaly: Koenigs et al. (2011) previously highlighted the lack of consistent neural correlates, while Griffiths and Jalava (2017) emphasized the absence of replicable patterns in studies based on the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). Deming, Heilicher & Koenigs (2022) similarly concluded that alterations in the amygdala are neither consistently nor reliably observed in individuals with psychopathy.

Together, these findings challenge the notion of a stable neuroanatomical profile for psychopathy and call for a critical reassessment of prevailing theoretical models and diagnostic frameworks in forensic neuroscience.

This re-evaluation is further supported by evidence that psychopaths largely retain the cognitive capacity to recognize and distinguish morally wrong actions (Seara-Cardoso et al. 2012; Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong, Kiehl 2014; Marshall et al. 2017) For a critical review of the ambiguity and interpretive limits of data from moral testing in psychopathy, see Maibom (2022), who argues that despite affective deficits, standard moral tasks fail to demonstrate a consistent or conclusive impairment in the moral understanding of individuals with psychopathy.

These results cast doubt on a widely accepted view since Blair (2007) and Kiehl (2006); namely, that psychopathy stems from dysfunctions in brain structures responsible for moral reasoning and emotional regulation. Rather than indicating impaired brain architecture, current evidence points to an alternative functional organization, suggesting that psychopaths are not insensitive due to cognitive deficits, but because of a different form of sensitivity.

This hypothesis supports the view that *indolent sympathy* reflects a stable and adaptively reorganized manifestation of emotional grammar, rather than the result

of cortical impairment.

As Churchland (2011) argues, the neural circuits underpinning morality function not as fixed modules, but as dynamic networks shaped by experience, social learning and environmental pressures. From this perspective, indolent sympathy can be understood as the product of an emotionally efficient architecture that is functionally coherent yet normatively dissonant when evaluated through the lens of prosocial morality.

Far from constituting a mere affective void, *indolent sympathy* constitutes a specific form of divergent affective resonance that operates according to a logic distinct from that of prosocial sympathy. Whereas prosocial sympathy involves empathic resonance directed toward the protection and well-being of others—as documented in models of care and reciprocity-based morality (Hoffman 2000; Eisenberg, Spinrad & Morris 2014; Decety & Cowell 2014)—indolent sympathy is marked by an emotional sensitivity strategically oriented toward manipulation, control or exploitation.

Neurocognitively, this configuration aligns with the activation of complex social brain networks—such as the default mode network (DMN), the temporoparietal junction (TPJ) and the mPFC —involved in Theory of Mind, social cognition, and moral simulation (Frith & Frith 2006; Reniers et al. 2012; Schilbach et al. 2008).

However, these activations may occur in a functionally decoupled manner from the affective circuits responsible for prosocial moral regulation, including those associated with compassion, guilt, and remorse (Lamm et al. 2011; Singer et al. 2006). This functional decoupling allows for a sophisticated understanding of others' mental states without triggering the emotional inhibition typically associated with instrumental or harmful behaviors—a pattern observed in individuals with psychopathic traits or high levels of interpersonal manipulation (Decety et al., 2013; Harenski et al. 2006).

Accordingly, *indolent sympathy* can be conceptualized as the outcome of a reorganised emotional architecture that engages the cognitive components of empathy while bypassing affective responses oriented toward care and concern for others.

Indolent sympathy should not be considered a pathology in the strict clinical sense, but as an adaptive form of deviant emotional regulation. It supports a form of agency capable of simulating interpersonal bonds and articulating morally acceptable judgments while engaging in instrumental brutality when conditions permit (Tovar-Bohórquez 2022).

This alternative motivational structure gives rise to moral agency not based on recognizing others as ends in themselves—to paraphrase Kant (AA 04:429)—but as means: emotionally accessible and cognitively manipulable objects.

A disconcerting feature of *indolent sympathy* is its capacity to operate effectively in complex social environments. Individuals with psychopathic traits often display charismatic social skills, enabling them to form superficial relationships, earn trust,

and rise within hierarchical structures without genuine affective engagement (Cleckley, 1982; Hare 1999; Glenn et al. 2009; Kirrane, Farqan, & Cloak; Persson, & Lilienfeld 2019; Welsh & Lenzenweger 2021; Lin & Xie, 2023). This moral mimicry renders them difficult to detect and allows them to exploit shared norms for instrumental ends.

This strategy enables psychopaths to evade sanctions, leverage social recognition and legitimize their behavior through a learned but unfelt moral language (Tovar-Bohórquez 2022). As Churchland (2011) might argue, if moral neural systems evolved to regulate cooperation, then under certain conditions these systems can support agents who are strategically effective—successful—but normatively dysfunctional.

However, the degree of such "success" or "failure" depends heavily on the social conditions in which these agents are socialized (Persson, & Lilienfeld 2019; Wallace et al. 2022). In contexts marked by high inequality, structural exclusion, or criminalization of poverty, the very traits that enable some psychopaths to ascend in certain environments, such as the corporate sphere (Boddy 2011, Garavito et al. 2024) may lead others toward marginalization or incarceration (Lykken 1995; Cale & Lilienfeld 2002; Skeem et al. 2011). This form of agency challenges Kantian and contractualist moral theories, where moral judgement presumes respect for others: in this case, the other is cognitively recognized, yet emotionally instrumentalized.

As Glenn and Raine (2014) and Waldman et al. (2018) have argued, although psychopathy has a genetic component, its expression is shaped by environmental conditions. These forms of normativity emerge not solely from individual dispositions, but also from the sociocultural contexts that enable or amplify them.

In this light, one might speak of *parallel moral systems* that govern atrocious behaviours—cruel, degrading, or devastating—without these acts being perceived as immoral by those who perpetrate them or by the communities that collectively legitimize them. Although these normative frameworks diverge from Kantian, utilitarian, or Aristotelian ethics, they nonetheless possess structure, internal coherence, and functional regulatory force.

As Churchland (2011) points out, the neural systems underlying moral judgement do not guarantee prosocial orientation; they evolved to regulate behavior in context. The form this regulation takes depends on both affective architecture and the social practices that shape it. Thus, psychopaths who act brutally may be morally imputable not because they violate universal norms, but because they act according to an emergent, divergent—yet real—normative logic.

Should we expand our normative frameworks to include the one that emerges from psychopathy, or reinforce our own to resist its influence? The answer has profound implications, especially for how we assign legal and moral responsibility to individuals with psychopathic traits.

The recognition that psychopaths can develop functionally stable—albeit emo-

tionally deviant and ethically problematic—forms of normativity invites a reconsideration of several core assumptions in moral philosophy. *Emotional grammar*—from which *indolent sympathy* emerges—allows for a broader, yet neurobiologically plausible, conception of moral judgement, one in which diverse emotional configurations can give rise to distinct normative architectures.

This idea is not only compatible with Patricia Churchland's (2011) evolutionary neurophilosophy, but also with the proposals of Jesse Prinz (2007) and Owen Flanagan (2017), who argue that morality is neither unique nor universal, but plural, contextual and emotionally mediated. What is at stake is not the search for a single morality, but an understanding of the capacity of agents to operate within various normative frameworks, some of which may even legitimize harm and brutality, if they are socially or cognitively validated.

Acknowledging this normative plurality does not entail endorsement, let alone justification. Rather, it enables us to understand it as part of the complex architecture of human moral experience. In contrast to models that view psychopathy as a pathology or moral anomaly, this proposal contends that we are dealing with a reorganized form of moral agency.[7]

4. Theoretical and normative implications

4.1. Indolent sympathy and the emergence of divergent normativity

The hypothesis of indolent sympathy raises a central normative question: Can an agent who does not experience prosocial moral emotions, yet regulates behavior coherently and engages evaluatively with others, be said to act morally?

This question reopens the classical metaethical debate on the relationship between moral judgment, motivation, and affect. In metaethical internalism, as articulated by Darwall (2006), the normative force of moral judgment presupposes an attitudinal recognition of others as ends—that is, as subjects of reasons. The perspective advanced here challenges this assumption, suggesting that affective configurations lacking such recognition may nonetheless generate stable and functionally coherent forms of normativity.

From indolent sympathy, as developed throughout this paper, emerges a form of normativity that diverges from the neurotypical moral architecture. This emergent normativity is not merely a mimicry of moral behavior, but a structurally organized framework that enables social adaptation, instrumental decision-making, and normative navigation in the absence of genuine prosocial motivation. It is precisely this divergence—from moral architectures grounded in empathy and care—that constitutes the philosophical and psychological originality of indolent sympathy.

To clarify this conceptual structure, it is helpful to distinguish between at least three levels of normativity: (1) *moral normativity*, based on values such as empathy, justice, and the intrinsic worth of others; (2) *functional normativity*, which regulates behavior according to adaptive success, without presupposing ethical grounding; and (3) *socially validated normativity*, whereby agents simulate moral alignment to gain legitimacy or evade sanctions, regardless of genuine endorsement.

Indolent sympathy gives rise to both functional and, in many cases, socially validated normativity. It enables agents to interpret others' emotions and intentions through a form of alternative affectivity that, while not aligned with prosocial emotional resonance, remains affectively operative. This affective disposition allows for strategic control or even brutal instrumentalization, without activating the moral inhibition typically associated with compassion or guilt. In contrast to Darwall's (2002) conception of sympathy as concern for others "for their own sake," indolent sympathy entails recognition without moral regard—a form of emotional attunement decoupled from normative concern.

Empirical and philosophical accounts of negative empathy—such as those advanced by Bloom (2017) and Breithaupt (2018)—support this interpretation: emotional attunement does not guarantee moral regard and can, in certain configurations, enhance the desire to dominate or exploit. The psychopath, or more precisely the indolent sympathizer, exemplifies this paradox: a subject who can modulate behavior in normatively intelligible ways without anchoring it in moral concern.

This form of agency does not merely simulate normativity. It operates according to organizing principles that, though ethically dissonant, are internally coherent and socially effective. From a naturalistic perspective informed by Churchland's (2011) neurophilosophy, this signals a genuinely emergent normative architecture—one that compels us to reconsider whether moral judgment must be tethered to prosocial sentiment.

In short, indolent sympathy does not simply accompany a divergent agency: it structurally generates a divergent normativity—functionally adaptive, normatively regulated, and affectively distinct from the neurotypical moral repertoire. Recognizing this emergence invites a critical revision of prevailing moral theories and challenges their implicit prosocial assumptions. Put differently: Should Western moral frameworks be revised to account for non-prosocial forms of agency that nonetheless display internal normative coherence?

4.2. Emotional grammar and indolent sympathy: scope and limitations

The hypothesis of emotional grammar—from which indolent sympathy emerges—offers both explanatory scope and integrative strength in understanding moral judgment and normative agency. First, it challenges the constraints of dysfunction-based

theories of psychopathy, showing that psychopathic behavior need not be understood solely as a failure of empathy or a deficit in violence inhibition. Rather, it can be understood as the outcome of a functional reorganization of affective dispositions.

Second, the model resists neurobiological reductionism by conceptualizing *emotional grammar* as a cognitive-affective structure that emerges from the dynamic interaction among neural substrate, social experience, normative learning, and emotional plasticity (Churchland 2011; Flanagan 2017; Decety 2021).

In doing so, it allows for the integration of previously contradictory empirical findings—for instance, the observation that psychopaths are capable of producing valid moral judgments yet engage in brutal actions, or that they retain an intact Theory of Mind while exhibiting a lack of congruent affective responses (Decety, Skelly & Kiehl 2013; Viding & McCrory 2012; Cima et al. 2010).

In response to these phenomena, *emotional grammar* provides a comprehensive framework capable of accounting for divergent normative trajectories without resorting to pathologizing constructs of dubious explanatory validity or borderline cases that exceed the scope of traditional explanatory models.

Moreover, by incorporating *indolent sympathy* as a distinct mode of emotional regulation, the model allows us to conceptualize how certain agents—such as successful psychopaths (Persson & Lilienfeld, 2019; Gao & Raine 2010)—are able to simulate moral behavior, manipulate normative structures, and enact coherent forms of agency within normative frameworks that are functionally effective yet ethically deviant (Tovar-Bohórquez 2022; Breithaupt 2018; Bloom, 2017).

Despite its conceptual strengths and consonance with recent developments in moral neuroscience and naturalized philosophy, the model of *emotional grammar* and *indolent sympathy* also faces several challenges and limitations that warrant acknowledgement. First, as with many philosophical proposals that integrate empirical findings, the hypothesis still lacks direct experimental validation: to date, no specific protocols currently exist to measure the reorganization of emotional grammar or to operationalize *indolent sympathy* as a testable variable.

Second, the notion of *functional normativity*—which is central to distinguishing between prosocial and divergent forms of moral agency—presents difficulties when attempting to reconcile it with legal, clinical, or educational frameworks, which typically rely on universalized conceptions of morality, empathy, and responsibility.

Moreover, while the plasticity of emotional grammar is philosophically promising, it entails significant methodological complexity: Its empirical investigation would require a multidisciplinary approach integrating neuroimaging, behavioral analysis, qualitative interviews, and institutional ethnography. Finally, although the model aspires to account for a wide range of normative trajectories, its practical applications remain insufficiently defined.

For instance, how might forms of agency structured by *indolent sympathy* be ad-

dressed or transformed? What implications would this have for frameworks of punishment, rehabilitation, or prevention? These questions do not undermine the proposal but rather underscore the need for a robust interdisciplinary research program that integrates moral philosophy, empirical psychology, neuroscience and the social sciences.

4.3. Beyond prosociality: extending Patricia Churchland's moral naturalism

The proposal advanced in this paper is situated within Patricia Churchland's naturalistic programme, while extending it into a less explored domain of her framework: the possibility that human moral agency is not exclusively driven by prosocial dispositions such as attachment, cooperation or reciprocity.

As Churchland (2011, pp.49, 55) has argued, moral processes are rooted in neurobiological systems that evolved to support social life—particularly through the action of oxytocin, dopamine and neural circuits involved in emotional regulation, attachment formation, and affiliative behavior. These systems are inherently plastic and responsive to experience, which accounts for both the universality of certain emotional responses and their variability across cultural and biographical contexts (2011, p.60).

Although Churchland (2011) acknowledges that moral norms may vary across communities and denies that morality possesses an immutable essence, her emphasis has largely remained on the human capacity to develop cooperative affective dispositions as the foundation of moral life (pp.9–10, 200).

This paper seeks to broaden that horizon by demonstrating that the same neurocognitive systems that enable the emergence of prosocial sympathy can, under certain biological and social conditions, give rise to alternative normative dispositions—such as indolent sympathy—geared not towards caring for others, but toward their instrumentalization. Far from contradicting Patricia Churchland's core thesis, this extension affirms it: human morality is neither fixed nor normatively monolithic, but an emergent phenomenon shaped by the dynamic interaction of brain, body and community (2011, p.9).

Accepting that moral agency can be structured by non-empathic dispositions compels a re-evaluation of one of modern humanism's most enduring theses: that empathy is a necessary condition for moral life. While this claim has been explicitly defended by authors such as Rifkin (2009) and Pinker (2011), and implicitly assumed in numerous pedagogical models and public policies, empirical studies increasingly challenge its normative authority. Far from being a morally infallible feeling, empathy has been shown to be selective, manipulable, and even capable of fueling intensified forms of cruelty (Bloom 2017; Prinz 2011; Breithaupt 2018; Decety 2021).

Indolent sympathy thus not only contests the assumption that morality is impossible without empathy, but also reveals the existence of coherent normative structures oriented toward control, domination or exclusion—structures that, while ethically dissonant, possess internal logic and demonstrable social efficacy. This insight carries significant implications for how we conceptualize responsibility, punishment and moral rehabilitation.

If *indolent sympathy* underpins a form of normative judgement, then agents who embody it are not simply devoid of morality, they operate within a divergent normative framework that must be understood before it can be effectively addressed. From this perspective, punishment cannot be framed solely as a response to the violation of "shared" norms; it must also be conceived as a potential intervention in alternative normative architectures, shaped by affective dispositions that depart from prosocial expectations.

As Churchland (2019) argues, moral change does not arise from the application of abstract principles, but from the gradual transformation of the material, affective and social conditions that shape our moral intuitions. Ethical norms emerge as adaptive responses to concrete relational challenges, and their evolution is rooted in the plasticity of the brain's reward systems, the mechanisms of social learning, and our sensitivity to interpersonal recognition.

Recognizing *indolent sympathy* as an affective disposition that generates—albeit in a dissonant fashion—a divergent form of normative agency not only broadens our conceptual understanding of human morality, but also introduces new ethico-political challenges.

Addressing the behavior of agents whose normativity does not recognize the others as ends in themselves, but rather as instrumentally manageable means, requires rehabilitation strategies that do not presuppose an empathic sensitivity. Instead, such interventions must begin by acknowledging that the affective dispositions and normative architecture underlying this form of agency exceeds the explanatory reach of traditional moral theories.

5. Conclusion

This article has proposed a reformulation of moral judgement in psychopathy through the concept of *emotional grammar*, conceived as a structural cognitive-affective system that organizes an individual's moral sensitivity from foundational emotional dispositions to complex evaluative capacities.

Drawing on the analogy with Chomsky's (1965) generative grammar, and remaining compatible with computational models such as Mikhail's (2011), the proposal integrates insights from affective neuroscience (Damasio 1994; Decety & Cowell 2014),

empirical moral psychology (Greene 2013; Haidt 2001), and naturalized moral philosophy (Churchland 2011; Flanagan 2017). It seeks to account for the formation, reconfiguration, and even distortion of moral judgements as shaped by affective dispositions internalized in specific sociocultural contexts.

Departing from dominant approaches that interpret psychopathy as an emotional deficit or as a failure of mechanisms such as violence inhibition (Hare 1999; Blair 2005; Garofalo et al. 2018; Nentjes et al. 2022; Velotti et al. 2024), this paper has advanced the hypothesis that psychopaths develop a form of second-order moral judgement, articulated through an affective disposition termed *indolent sympathy* (Tovar-Bohórquez 2022).

This form of sympathy—emerging from factors such as an intact Theory of Mind, a negative mode of empathy, and the absence of compassionate resonance—enables the individual to simulate prosocial behavior, articulate morally acceptable judgments, manipulate others emotionally, and sustain a functionally coherent yet affectively dissonant form of normative agency (Bloom 2017; Breithaupt 2018; Decety 2021).

Supported by recent research that challenges the hypothesis of systematic brain dysfunction in psychopaths (Deming et al. 2024; Deming, Heilicher & Koenigs 2022; Griffiths and Jalava 2017; Koenigs et al. 2011), this perspective reframes psychopathy not as a moral anomaly, but as a structural variation in *emotional grammar*. Such a variation highlights the existence of multiple normative configurations within a naturalistic framework, thereby expanding our conception of moral agency beyond prosocial paradigms.

Recognizing the existence of a divergent form of normativity structured by *indolent sympathy* invites a re-examination of the boundaries of ethical theory and of the normative models that inform clinical, legal and educational practice. If moral judgement is defined not exclusively by prosocial content but by internal normative architecture—whether empathic or instrumental—then psychopathy must be understood not as borderline or pathological case, but as a revealing case for exploring the diversity of human moral configurations (Flanagan 2017; Churchland 2011; Prinz 2007).

This theoretical shift carries both philosophical and political implications: it calls for a reconsideration of core categories such as responsibility, imputability and moral rehabilitation, while also demanding the formulation of public policies that move beyond deficit-correction models toward the recognition, and engagement with divergent affective architectures.

Moreover, *emotional grammar*, as a theoretical model, offers a flexible framework for investigating non-canonical forms of moral agency—for example, in individuals shaped by chronic exposure to violence or embedded in non-Western moral traditions—thereby broadening the comparative scope of moral psychology and neu-

roethics.

Future research should aim to develop mixed methodological strategies that integrate neurocognitive analysis with behavioral assessments and ethnographic enquiry to empirically validate the hypothesis of divergent moral reorganization.

Conceived in this way, *emotional grammar* not only deepens the interdisciplinary dialogue among philosophy, neuroscience and psychopathology, but also advocates for a normative pluralism more attuned to the complexity of human moral experience and more responsive to the affective variability underlying moral sensitivity.

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Notes

[1]The term 'functional' is used here in a neuropsychological and naturalistic sense, referring to theories that explain moral judgement based on the performance of affective or cognitive systems whose evolutionary function is presumed to be the regulation of social behavior, inhibition of violence, or promotion of cooperative bonds. In this approach, moral judgement is not defined by its normative content or universal rational principles, but by the brain mechanisms that generate it and the functions these mechanisms fulfil within the agent's mental architecture. Accordingly, deviations from prosocial morality—such as those observed in psychopathy—are typically interpreted as dysfunctions or failures in the expected operation of these systems (see, for example, Churchland 2011; Greene 2013; Decety and Cowell 2014).

[2]The Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R) developed by Robert D. Hare, is a widely used diagnostic instrument primarily applied in forensic settings, especially among adult male incarcerated populations. Individuals who obtain high scores are often referred to as *unsuccessful psychopaths*, in contrast to *successful psychopaths*—those who exhibit psychopathic traits in social or professional environments without legal repercussions, and whose characteristics may not be adequately captured by the PCL-R— (Hare 1991, 1999, 2003; see also Lilienfeld, Watts & Smith 2015).

[3]*Genuinely normative moral judgements* refer to evaluations that are not only propositionally appropriate but also accompanied by affectively congruent states—such as emotions like compassion, guilt or indignation—and that possess genuine motivational force. These judgements entail a practical commitment to the asserted moral norm, thereby distinguishing them from merely verbal, mimetic or strategically functional judgements, such as those that may be articulated by certain individuals with psychopathy without experiencing emotional conflict or aversion to harm (Nichols 2004, 19, 27, 28, 59, 73, 82, 99; Churchland 2011, 85; Rosati 2016).

[4]In *How to do things with words*, Austin (1962) distinguishes among *locutionary acts* (the act of saying something meaningful), *illocutionary acts* (the performative force of saying something, e.g., promising, warning, or justifying) and *perlocutionary acts* (the intended effects on the listener, such as persuading, frightening, or manipulating). In psychopathy, moral judgements may be better understood not as sincere expressions of internalized norms but as strategic speech acts aimed at producing specific social effects. From this perspective, the psychopath's moral utterances function as *perlocutionary performances* that simulate norma-

tive commitment without affective resonance or motivational alignment. Thus, the issue is not epistemic error or rational deficit, but a form of functional performativity decoupled from the prosocial emotional architecture that typically sustains neurotypical morality.

[5]Whereas Mikhail's moral grammar focuses on the level of moral competence—describing the abstract, rule-based structure that enables individuals to generate consistent moral judgments—the concept of emotional grammar developed in this paper refers to the neuroaffective scaffolding that regulates the performance of those judgments in real-world contexts. Emotional grammar accounts for how affective salience, embodied experience, and social learning shape the enactment and variability of moral evaluations, including those of atypical agents.

[6]By *basic emotions*, I refer to phylogenetically ancient, evolutionary conserved affective responses that emerge early in development and serve key adaptive functions. Emotions such as fear, anger, and disgust are typically considered basic insofar as they are biologically ingrained, cross-culturally recognizable, and rooted in subcortical brain systems. As the neocortex matures, these emotions undergo cognitive elaboration and become increasingly integrated into higher-order representational and normative systems. For example, fear—initially a reflexive response to immediate physical threats—can, over time, be reconfigured toward abstract or symbolic targets (e.g. fear of supernatural agents, moral transgressions, or social condemnation). This trajectory reflects the plasticity of emotional processing and its capacity for cultural modulation and conceptual generalization.

[7]Although this paper has addressed psychopathy in general terms, ongoing research highlights significant *sex-based variations* in its affective and cognitive dimensions. Historically, psychopathy research has centered on male populations, leading to diagnostic frameworks and theoretical models calibrated to male-typical presentations, especially within forensic contexts (Cale & Lilienfeld 2002; Spormann et al. 2023). Recent findings, however, suggest that female psychopathy constitutes a distinct affective and behavioral configuration. Women with elevated psychopathic traits tend to exhibit attenuated emotional responsiveness specifically to others' suffering, while preserving sensitivity in other emotional domains (Verona et al. 2013; Efferson & Glenn 2018). Their antisocial tendencies more commonly take the form of relational aggression—such as manipulation or social exclusion—rather than overt acts of violence (Tully et al. 2023). Additionally, they are more likely to endorse utilitarian responses in moral dilemmas, reflecting an emotionally disengaged form of moral reasoning (Seara-Cardoso et al., 2013). These differences underscore the need for gender-responsive diagnostic tools and pluralistic models of *emotional grammar* capable of accommodating sex-specific trajectories in the development and expression of moral agency.

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