

## **Moral Personality, Prereflexive Inhibition and the Importance of the Process of Internalizing Moral Values**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to highlight the importance of the theory of situational action in criminological research, the description of cumulative risk factors, moral personality and the importance of the process of internalizing moral values. Wikström argues that the moral situation in which the perpetrator finds himself and the criminogenic context influence the process of perception-choice of action alternatives, of the moral decision at the moment of committing the act; acts of violence are therefore moral actions. The perpetrator perceives crime as an alternative course of action. The ordinary individual (socially integrated) does not perceive the crime, does not notice, or even intuit, the alternative of committing the criminal act. This absence of pre-intentional vision should be considered useful in the reintegration treatment of convicts. It is achieved only by internalizing moral norms in the personality of the prisoner. Reintegration represents a reenactment of the moral function. The pre-essentiality of the human being resides in the activation of the moral personality. Prereflexive inhibition removes any form of manifestation of the destructive drive, becomes a psychological barrier, cognitively and emotionally stops the activity of the uncontrollable, instinctive will. In this paper, we analyze from a criminological point of view both sufficient reasons and irresistible reasons in justifying criminal action.

**KEYWORDS:** situational action theory, perception-choice process, prereflexive inhibition, imperative reasons

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary criminology is faced with the need to integrate moral, cognitive and neuropsychological explanations into a unified framework for the analysis of criminal behavior. Beyond exclusively structural or utilitarian models, it is becoming increasingly evident that crime must be understood as a moral action, resulting from a complex process of perception, evaluation and choice, located at the intersection of the individual's moral personality and the criminogenic context in which he acts. The present paper aims to explain from a

criminological point of view the moral personality and the role of prereflexive inhibition in the prevention and explanation of criminal behavior, also analyzing the Situational Action Theory formulated by Per-Olof H. Wikström. It is argued that the fundamental difference between the criminal and the non-criminal does not reside exclusively in the rational calculation of costs and benefits, but in the absence or presence of the perception of the criminal alternative at the preintentional level. In this context, the study introduces a conceptual distinction relevant to analytical criminology: that between sufficient and irresistible motives, analyzed from both a philosophical and neurocognitive perspective. By integrating contributions from moral philosophy, developmental psychology, and neuroscience, the paper aims to highlight how the internalization of moral values can constitute a central mechanism of prevention and social reintegration.

### **Situational Action Theory**

Situational Action Theory (SAT) formulated by criminologist Per-Olof H. Wikström is an explanatory framework that integrates individual and contextual factors to explain criminal behavior. In essence, SAT argues that crimes are moral actions (violations of rules of conduct) determined by the interaction between criminal propensity (the individual's predisposition to crime) and the context (the criminogenic situation) that attracts the perpetrator to act (Wikström, 2020). People commit crimes when, in a given situation, they perceive criminal behavior as an acceptable alternative and choose it as such, given their personal morality and the influences of the social environment (Wikström, 2020). When the offender observes the criminogenic context and analyzes the opportunity to act, the crime may occur. In this situation, the offender is interested in obtaining a result from committing the criminal act, is interested and concerned to obtain immediate information for the success of committing the crime. Criminal skills and experience are activated by the emotional-moral factor, by the electrical process of neuronal training (Libet, (1985). If the moral court is weak (moral filter that helps the perpetrator to anticipate during the perception-choice process) the decision to commit the criminal act will not be discouraged by internal moral resources (capable of blocking the will to commit the crime) and will be influenced only by external factors, which may or may not discourage the action. Personal moral conscience has moral rules different from the general moral rules of society. Personal interest and egocentrism objectify a superior imperative force to impulsively commit the crime. In this situation, when the criminogenic context is favorable (the public guardian is absent, there is no social factor capable of intervening and discouraging the action), and the victim is vulnerable, the perpetrator deliberates, uses the perception-choice process and establishes whether or not it is advantageous to act. His strategy is influenced by internal deterrence - the moral filter that should censor the conscious intention (the intellectual and

volitional factor) and stop the formation of criminal ideation, the transition to the act, and by external deterrence - witnesses, police, the presence of elements that could contribute to the failure of the criminal action. When the perpetrator deliberates, the intentional action is operative, if there is no internal psychological barrier and no outside person intervenes to threaten the success of the criminal act. Usually, sufficient reasons for committing the act are influenced and emotionally prepared by the neurocognitive process and the moral experience of the perpetrator, by the satisfaction he obtained when he received the immediate reward after committing other crimes. If the criminogenic situation is similar, if moral inhibition is not an internal obstacle, the perpetrator will act without remorse, without any feeling of guilt.

According to the theory of situational action, acts of violence are the result of a psychological process of perception-choice, through which the perpetrator finds the sufficient reason for the act, deliberates and chooses the alternative closest to his own moral rules. The perception-choice process is a process of reflective self-awareness that analyzes the sufficient reasons for action for the commission of the criminal act. According to Wikstrom, "criminal acts are the result of the interaction between people's criminal predisposition (dependent on their personal morality and ability to exercise self-control) and criminogenic exposure (dependent on the moral context of the opportunities they encounter in the environment in which they participate)" (Wikstrom, 2020). The more an individual's moral rules correspond to the moral rules adopted in the laws, the less likely they are to commit a criminal act (Wikstrom, 2006). Criminal law is essentially a set of moral rules; a crime can be defined as an act of violating a moral rule defined in criminal law (Wikstrom, 2006).

### **Prereflexive inhibition**

The socially integrated individual (as a subject of moral action) does not see the crime, does not notice or intuit the alternative of committing the criminal act. This absence, falling into hiding, of preintentional vision is considered the best prevention. The reintegration of the convicted person, the prisoner, represents a strong re-enactment of the moral function, a bringing out of hiding the moral personality (*personalitas moralis*). The pre-essentiality of the human being resides in the activation of the moral function. Prereflexive inhibition removes any form of manifestation of the destructive drive, becomes a psychological barrier. It can stop and stop cognitively, emotionally, the activation of the lower, uncontrollable will. The analysis of moral, situational actions is the object of analytical criminology. Wikstrom believes that the criminogenic space and the existential situation in which the perpetrator finds himself influence the process of perception-choice of action alternatives, of moral decisions at the moment of committing the act.

In a social context, when the victim is vulnerable or the crime represents an opportunity, an occasion that involves investment in an action that is easy to

achieve, the non-offender, who has a moral personality, internalized moral principles and feelings, empathy, respect, the desire to help community members, will not act and will not commit the criminal act because he does not see an opportunity for a crime (Wikstrom, 2020); the non-offender does not perceive the opportunity and the possibility of an immediate reward from the illicit act, he does not perceive the gratification. For the non-offender, the process of perception-choice of the social context is a process of perception of non-criminal reality, because the higher moral will does not notice motives for action, is not concerned with the illicit activity and will pass by the situation, the moral filter of the participant does not even deliberate. Moral consciousness does not discuss alternatives, because the situation does not cause a state of pressure on the psychic apparatus. The perception of the alternative to the crime is absent. The non-offender does not see a criminogenic event, because, in this context, he is not interested in seeing the opportunity, the opportunity for action; he is indifferent to the created social reality and does not commit the criminal act because there is no pre-intentional act prepared by cerebral activity (neuronal preparation potential) and no emotional-moral state materializes impulses generating intentions.

### **Sufficient reasons and irresistible reasons (imperative)**

In his 2023 article, "Justification and Motivation", James Edwards explores the relationship between justification and motivation in the context of human actions, focusing on the concept of "sufficient reasons" and "overwhelming reasons". Sufficient reasons: These are reasons that, while they may justify an action, are not necessarily decisive. An agent may have sufficient reasons to act in a certain way, but may choose not to do so because of other considerations (Edwards, 2023). Overwhelming reasons: These are reasons that have such strong justificatory force that they cannot be defeated by other, contrary reasons. When an agent has an overwhelming reason to act, this should be decisive in making the decision, regardless of other considerations (Edwards, 2023). Edwards analyzes how these types of reasons influence the justification of actions and how they relate to the agent's motivation, providing a detailed perspective on the interaction between justification and motivation.

Beyond the sufficient reasons that pass through the moral filter of reflective self-awareness, there is another type of reasons, the imperative reasons for action, strong, invincible, according to the theory of motivation. These reasons cannot be analyzed by the decision-making process, the psychological barrier. They are prepared by the electric-neuronal process, the neuronal area of anonymous, pre-reflective consciousness, according to analytical psychology. Sufficient reasons are reasons that can influence the moral decision-making process, are reasons that interact with the criminogenic situation, can be removed by the veto right of the moral will, depend on the existential contingency of the action, when certain internal or external factors can intervene and favor the occurrence of the criminal

act or can discourage its commission. Imperative motives are strong, invincible motives that bypass the decision-making process, are committed with discernment and, although they are not part of the category of motives of functional automatism, they come close to them, but are produced by pre-reflective consciousness, pre-moving consciousness, preliminary to the act. From a neuroscientific point of view, these imperative motives have a strong emotional cause, influenced by the limbic system and the preconscious area of the psychic apparatus. The transformation of a sufficient motive into an imperative-uncontrollable motive is still not clear. In the semi-structured interviews in the Craiova Detention Center, the minor participants could not explain their lack of self-control at the moment of committing the serious criminal act (homicide) nor the sufficient motives that influenced the moral decision to produce the result. Very many participants believe that an unstoppable imperative motive pushed them to commit the homicide, and the existential, emotional state preceding the intentionality of the action played an important role. Imperative motives interact with the limbic system, they come from the area of pre-reflective self-awareness or anonymous consciousness, as Frank (2022) describes it. The importance of the context (of the criminogenic situation) is decisive in the production of violence. Sometimes, the vulnerable but provocative victim can influence the moral decision to act and the violent behavior of the perpetrator. Everything depends on his predisposition to commit the crime, on his moral personality, on his inner moral norms. According to Jung, the birth of the human personality is a process of individuation, it is the process that brings out the moral being and produces the individual. Consciousness is described by Jung as an equivalent relationship between the Ego and the psychic contents. Sufficient motives (which justify the criminal action) are psychic processes of control, which pass through the sphere of reflective consciousness, where the Ego deliberates on the alternatives of action (Wikstrom, 2016). Imperative motives are uncontrollable (invincible) psychic processes that cannot be censored, go beyond the sphere of deliberative consciousness, are prepared by the pre-reflective, anonymous, preconscious consciousness, and come more from the area of darkness of pre-thinking (Jung, 2011, p. 253), malignant destructive drives. The process of selecting a number of alternative actions (Haggard, 2019) is a pre-motivated choice process, preceding the initiation of sufficient motives for action. Haggard argues that, in a weak sense, the ability to inhibit makes all actions volitional. If someone is able to inhibit their actions, then they could have done otherwise when they act (positive will – initiation of intentional action; negative will – the ability to inhibit actions that are inappropriate). Will refers to an endogenous capacity for action, especially directed toward a goal, endogenous action shared by humans and animals (Haggard, 2019). There are three basic features of will: generativity (the capacity to trigger actions), subjectivity (the conscious experiences associated with initiating voluntary actions), and teleology, the quality of direct purposeful action of voluntary actions

(Haggard, 2019). Burch (2018) argues that an individual cannot intentionally act against the best judgment of his or her mind, because to act intentionally is precisely to act according to your judgment. "On this view, then, akratic acts are not intentional, but rather are caused by a temporary loss of self-control, usually attributed to excessive desire. Desire derails the agent's practical judgment, forcing it to go against its own sense of what is best" (Burch, 2018). The will operates independently of judgment, and we sometimes act intentionally against ourselves; spontaneous intentional actions are intentional only by virtue of antecedent deliberative processes (Burch, 2018).

From a criminological point of view, the acceptance process is a psychic act (internal psychic action) preceding the intention to commit the criminal act, it is a purely preintentional act. Acceptance is a virtual psychic process (mentally predicted), a conscious prediction of the outcome of the crime, the deduction of the criminal outcome from previous acts. The internal sense that you initiate, control and are the author of your actions (Haggard, 2019), this experience of controlling your own actions and, through them, the course of events in the outside world is called the "sense of agency". Is this sense of agency defective in the personality of the offender? Does he have the perspective of the consequences of his actions? (Does he hear the scream of the mother who sees her little girl raped and killed? The case of Marianne Bachmeier 1981; or can the drug dealer look at a young man who is in withdrawal? A pimp accepts the desperate situation of exploited girls, who are agonizing, mistreated and raped). The theory of situational action considers that the perpetrator accepts the criminogenic context, because his moral personality is different from the morality of the community members who respect social rules; the moral personality of the offender is different, his moral experiences are not close to the moral experience of society. The drive imperative is an inevitable force of bodily nature, an invincible chemical desire of the brain, which commands psychic action. It is a psychic force influenced by corporeality, by brain chemistry, which defeats the psychic force of moral consciousness (of the orbitofrontal cortex). Circuits that defeat cerebral circuits; brain circuits are not only reactive, but also plastic: repeated moral decisions strengthen self-control networks (Davidson et al., 2003). However, in the absence of conscious effort and reflection, desires can take control.

### **Values that give value**

Only certain values can be considered potential values that confer personal value. Values that give value can be considered a tautological, meaningless expression, but in criminological analysis we try to explain which social values, which existential events, situations, contexts can change the cognitive process of perception of reality, and the alternative of committing a crime to be replaced by a sufficient reason that discourages antisocial behavior. Identifying the value that creates personal value for the perpetrator is important in the perception-choice process,

because this subjective value can cause behavior change, can transferentially objectify the process of self-legislation of the moral personality. Deliberation as a moral decision-making process can be analyzed in this situation as a process that creates moral experience. This deliberation can be useful in the future deliberative process, a true process of self-legislation of personal moral values, which give meaning to the perpetrator's life and sometimes get him out of the psychic blockage and moral self-sabotage. The process of value perception is a subjective neural process, where the affective, emotional-cognitive factor plays an important role (amygdala, limbic system). We are constantly surrounded by examples of social values, moral feelings that create respect and highlight the positive side of the human being. The emotion of prosocial actions vitalizes the belief in cardinal, moral values. A fundamental moral truth, universally accepted by any community, is to serve others, to help others (in this sense, Heidegger's (2006, p. 231) remarkable interpretation of the concept of *Personalitas Moralis* described by Kant). The perpetrator is truly free and can express himself, with the entire essence of his moral personality, when he no longer has to deliberate, when the process of perception-choice of the alternative of committing or not committing the criminal act is replaced by pure superior will, which no longer needs a choice, because the created existential situation cannot encourage, cannot engage the moral self in committing the crime. The moral self finds its essence in this superior, free attitude, when it cannot be influenced by inclinations or predispositions, and the criminogenic social context does not reveal in the moral conscience any interest in violence or antisocial behaviors. The criminal act cannot be a choice, because the perpetrator subject has no representation, does not see the conception (Wikstrom, 2016) does not notice the commission or representation of the crime. The moral self does not perceive, does not intuit the criminal act, because the neuronal cognitive process is influenced by the moral personality and does not prepare any emotional-cognitive state that could precede the conscious intention. The emotion of prosocial actions must self-legislate the internal moral value of the perpetrator. If the perpetrator does not perceive prosocial activity as a resource for activating the value of the personal moral personality, the alternative to committing a crime can initiate a deliberation process (Wikstrom, 2020). What is the personal advantage of committing the criminal act? The personal advantage is described by the moral disorder in the perpetrator's criminal history. Criminal experiences have produced in the past (during childhood and adolescence) positive emotions, true emotional rewards, pleasures, sensory experiences transformed into addictions (a true gratification that has remained implanted in the affective memory) and establish at the time of committing the criminal act the degree of satisfaction depending on the criminal success. The process of internalizing morality is carried out during childhood, with the positive image of parents (family members, teachers) (Freud, 1923). Their absence can disrupt the moral function, the child does not have the positive experience of prosocial actions and no parental

authority to prohibit antisocial acts. Jean Piaget develops the concept of heteronomous morality and specifies that, up to the age of 10, children consider that everything is permitted, except for situations that parents or family members who hold authority (sometimes teachers) prohibit and punish them. Their justice is immanent, a moral absolutism (Piaget, 1965). Mirror neurons, through imitation, play an important role in discovering the moral function. Imitation of the positive behavior of other children provides satisfaction, pleasure, reward. Through the same mechanism, aggressive behavior can be imitated which can stimulate the impression of power to obtain the reward through violent actions. The predisposition that causes antisocial behavior can be deceived, it can be censored, if the social environment where the individual lives does not provoke the potentiality of criminogenic conflict, does not activate or deactivate genes that, through interaction with the toxic environment (for example, childhood maltreatment) would prepare the will to open or manifest the predisposition (Moffitt, 1993). The predisposition can be controlled by the birth of the moral personality, through each action the subject invents and prepares another representation of his moral being; contingency and freedom of choice (Sartre, 1946). Parents and the social educational environment can contribute fundamentally to the formation of the moral personality. The individual with antisocial predisposition (inherits the antisocial personality of the father, the case of Kuklinski, Râmăru) must discover in his moral being the attachment to prosocial emotions, respect, moral feelings (Kant). Receiving warmth and love from the mother (attachment theory), appreciation from family members and the educational community, he can discover in his own person the meaning of life (Frankl, 2006) and the ability to integrate, to internalize in the openness of the Self the moral values of society, which creates his own moral value. Cognitive-neuroscientific research must discover the mechanism of this integration, the mechanism by which the moral values of society can open up in the human being the moral value of the Self, the psychic, biopsychological processes that trigger this internalization (Hegheș, 2020); (the identification stage; the stage of inner analysis as a process of emotional perception, cognitive-intellectual choice, deliberation; the stage of accepting the meaning of the moral value and integrating this meaning into the personality of the perpetrator; the acceptance-integration process is an emotional-intellectual process that transmits its experience and information to the neuronal imprint of the moral self-Inzlicht).

Morality is the purpose of life, its finality as preessentiality, not just a means to promote in the social career, not a fear of the criminal law or the prison experience (Tănăsescu, 2018). Morality is a way of life. The moral self discovers its own reason for functioning socially as the essence of the categorical imperative (responsibility). Sometimes morality is just a condition, it is a manifestation of a hypothetical imperative (if you want A, then you must do B); morality is not internalized as an absolute, unconditional value; from Kant's perspective this type



of morality is unacceptable, but for the followers of Hume's philosophy (reason is influenced by passions) it is legitimate, rational choice theories allow functional justifications of morality (efficiency). Interpreting Kant's theory, Mircea Flonta analyzes the actions of people who are ready to sacrifice their lives to defend the legitimate interests of a community or to save people's lives; Flonta argues that this is the situation of all altruistic actions that involve the defeat of selfish inclinations. For Kant, the individual achieves good not out of inclination, but out of duty, in the sense that good is internalized in his moral being. He acts not out of obligation or fear, but because the moral feeling of his being acts freely, in a natural, unconditional way. For Kant, the conscience that has not deliberately violated its duty is the source of the highest and purest satisfaction. It is the conscience of the virtuous man. Flonta analyzes the concept of moral duty, "Kant seems to have considered that the moral consciousness of what is moral duty is implanted in human reason just as instincts are implanted in the being of animals" (Flonta, 2012, p. 120). This conception complicates the validity of Freud's theory of the Superego, which considers that it is born into being as a moral instance originating from the essence of the child's experiences in its emotional, positive interactions with its parents, the Superego being a development of an affectively obtained ideal Self, an empirical revelation, emotional transfer of idealizing images. Kant believes that any moral attitude must be oriented towards the achievement of the supreme good, which in fact translates into the achievement of the common good, of all, as a universal maxim. Sometimes the egocentric Ego is overwhelmed by the demands of the social environment, feels ineffective and seems absent and unmotivated to engage in socially positive projects. We have to choose the common good, sacrificing the personal good, and this choice is accompanied by the overwhelming feeling of existential fatigue, of self-fulfillment, of meaninglessness when you cannot get out of the exhausting routine of the wrong thing done. Sometimes work seems degrading, dehumanizes you and does not seem like an alternative to a life of crime. Popper (1963, p. 239) analyzing the spirit of Kant's ethics, considers that man must dare to be free and respect the freedom of others. Kant conceived the Supreme Good as the final goal of the moral law, which moral conduct should promote in the long term (Reath); The Supreme Good must be understood as a world in which happiness would exist in proportion to virtue; is a state of affairs that takes place in the world of reason, not in the world of the senses (Reath).

Aligning decisions with prevailing social norms and the expectations of those around us is a fundamental aspect of moral decision-making (Kim & Kim, 2025). The findings provide empirical evidence of the neural mechanism that links interoception to moral preferences aligned with group consensus (Kim & Kim, 2025). In the context of childhood maltreatment, social deprivation, abuse by the mother's intimate partner, exposure to criminogenic situations and criminal subcultures, the mirror neuron mechanism can trigger imitation of antisocial behavior. Bandura (1977) believes that there are situations when children observe

that their playmates are punished or rewarded for certain inappropriate behaviors, and these experiences remain in the neural memory, influencing moral decisions. Empathic response may be diminished in the situation of children who have been exposed to violence for a long time; the MNS system can become desensitized (Decety et al., 2009); the perception of pain in others determines the activation of the neural circuit that serves to process the affective and motivational dimension of pain; the areas that process the sensory dimension of pain can also be triggered by the visual perception of the pain of others (Decety, Calina Mikalska, 2008). Prolonged exposure to violence during childhood is associated with a significant decrease in empathic response, a phenomenon that can be explained, at least in part, by desensitization processes at the level of the mirror neuron system (Mirror Neuron System – MNS). Neuroimaging studies indicate that, in the case of children and adolescents chronically exposed to interpersonal violence, the activation of neural networks involved in empathy for the pain of others is reduced or functionally altered, suggesting a defensive neurocognitive adaptation (Jean Decety et al., 2009). The perception of pain experienced by others normally activates neural circuits involved in processing the affective and motivational dimensions of pain, including the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex, regions associated with emotional appraisal and prosocial motivation. This partial overlap between networks involved in one's own pain and that of others constitutes a central neural mechanism of affective empathy (Decety & Michalska, 2008). In Jean Piaget's theory of moral development, heteronomous morality represents the initial stage of moral judgment in children (characteristic of children under 10 years of age). This form of morality is deeply dependent on an external authority, on rules perceived as absolute, as well as on prejudices about evil and punishment (Patanella, 2011). The transition to autonomous morality occurs when the child begins to perceive rules as moral norms necessary for social coexistence.

## Conclusions

Moral personality does not only have a normative or educational feature, but must also be perceived as an active functional structure, capable of blocking the emergence of criminal intent from the prereflexive phase. From the perspective of the Theory of Situational Action, crime occurs only when the individual perceives illegal behavior as an alternative action. This perception is itself conditioned by the internal moral architecture of the agent.

The non-criminal does not deliberate on the crime precisely because he does not see it. The absence of representation of the criminal alternative indicates the existence of a prereflexive moral filter, which operates prior to any conscious assessment of advantages or risks. This prereflexive inhibition can be interpreted as a form of stable moral self-legislation, in the sense of the Kantian philosophy of internalized moral duty, but also as the result of an affective and relational history that has strengthened empathy, respect and attachment to others. In contrast, the

personality of the offender is characterized by a moral discontinuity with community norms, manifested by the rapid activation of imperative, invincible motives that bypass the reflective deliberative process. Qualitative data obtained from interviews with juveniles deprived of their liberty support the hypothesis that extreme violence is often experienced subjectively as a result of an irresistible internal constraint, associated with intense emotional states and dysfunctions of self-control. Future criminological research must also analyze the reconstruction of the moral personality, in which educational and therapeutic interventions should target not only antisocial behavior, but also the prereflexive structures of the moral instance. Current research confirms the relevance of the Situational Action Theory as an integrative model capable of explaining criminal behavior beyond isolated social or biological determinisms. Crime appears as the result of a moral process of perception-choice, conditioned by the structure of the moral personality and the individual's capacity to activate prereflexive inhibition mechanisms. Real crime prevention cannot be reduced only to external deterrence or criminal sanction, but also involves the deep internalization of moral values, which eliminates the very possibility of representing crime as an option for action. In this sense, moral personality becomes a central concept for criminological research.

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