Abstract
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Do biological approaches explain (a-)moral behaviour? Problems and potentials of studies focused on a genetic predisposition of human behaviour

In the year 2009 an Italian Court decided in a revision procedure to reduce a convicted murderer's level of sentence because of his special genetic predisposition. The Court referred to a behavioural genetic study suggesting an unfavourable impact of a gene variant on the man's actions. More specifically: The man carried a specific variant of the MAOA-gene suspected of increasing the likelihood of aggressive, antisocial and criminal behaviour under certain environmental conditions. The study the Italian Judges' argues principally were based on was made by Avshalom Caspi and colleagues and drew global attention when published in 2002.[1] Since then it often can be found in psychological textbooks as a reference example of how a biological factor correlated to environmental factors can effect human behaviour. In this respect the study by Caspi et al. is of particular relevance for the empirical research into human morality because it obviously subjects the general ability to behave morally on the conditions of a genetic human makeup.
If moral capacity were indeed to a certain degree genetically pre-determined, this would have far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of penal law. By indicating to minimize the risk to society someone might require the political demand to put people who have a unfavourable gene variant—like the mentioned murderer—as a precautionary measure under surveillance. In view of advancing possibilities of PND parents also might get aware of gene variants that are unfavourable for the child's moral capacity so that the decision to carry the child to full term might be influenced.
Confronted with these imaginable social consequences, the question arises whether empirical studies that content statements on the biological predisposition of moral behaviour are sustainable and valid or not.
If we take a look at the study by Caspi et al. more closely, some methodological problems occur that might bring into question its relevance under penal law as mentioned above.
This paper is meant to discuss some of the methodological problems that might be observed often in case that researchers from across the departments of biology and moral psychology explain human behaviour. It is argued that especially the insufficient use of further independent variables creates the impression of a convincing evidence that biological factors explain human behaviour in general and moral behaviour in particular. On the other hand potentials of integrating biological variables into models of the explanation of ethics shall be considered as well. Here it is argued that especially scientific researchers in the field of moral psychology could help to check and, where necessary, to modify definitions of ethical terms that are normally used by philosophers and social scientists for being brought into connection with moral human behaviour (as, for instance, the definition of 'values', 'virtues' etc.).

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1 Caspi, Avshalom/McClay, Joseph/Moffitt, Terrie E./Mill, Jonathan/Martin, Judy/Craig, Ian W./Taylor, Alan/Poulton, Richie, 2002: Role of Genotype in the Cycle of Violence in Maltreated Children. Science 297: 851-854.