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# In Search of the Context of a Question

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**Abstract:** How is the role of context in moral philosophy to be understood? Why is the consideration of context important here? This paper is a small contribution to answering these questions. The kind of context that is in focus does not help us answer moral questions but is essential for understanding what kind of moral question arises – indeed, if any question arises at all. For whom does the question arise? What form does the question have for him or her? What relation does the person for whom it arises have to the events in the example as described by the philosopher? In considering such issues, the importance of thinking from an existentially and morally engaged perspective becomes evident.

**Keywords:** moral question, context, example, theatre, Haidt

## 1 Introduction

How is the role of context in moral philosophy to be understood? Why is the consideration of context important here? In this paper, I will make a small contribution to answering these questions. My main concern is to describe the kind of context I have in mind when I say that not overlooking it is essential. To do so, I will approach the issue both negatively, giving examples of moral examples that do not work and explaining what the problem is, and positively, giving examples of how moral examples could be formulated and used in a more fruitful way. My main concern will be moral questions – whether a specific question arises at all and how it should be understood when it does arise – not the answers to such questions. Explaining why examples in moral philosophy might fail and making some suggestions on how these problems can be avoided would then be the methodological contribution of this paper to moral philosophy.

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## 2 An Example of a Moral Example

In moral philosophy, a moral question is often taken to have this form:

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love? (Haidt 2001, 814)

This example is taken from a paper by Jonathan Haidt. The example is supposed to be free-standing, not requiring any background information for it to be intelligible and possible to take a stand on. Haidt uses the answers to his question that people come up with to argue for a specific thesis on the place of morality in human life, and his theoretical convictions are thus not supposed to be part of the context of the example. That Haidt's concern is a general theoretical one also means that he is not interested in the question of incest as such. The story is only supposed to be an example of a moral question. This means that it works well for my methodological concerns. Like Haidt, I have little interest in the question of incest as such, and this paper will not attempt to address it. My focus is on *Haidt's* question and *his* example, not on any possible question one might ask about incest. My question is whether the story provides us with a moral question, and if it does, how that question should be understood. This also means that I will not take a stand on Haidt's theoretical conclusions. Instead, I will stay close to the example, modifying it along the way, to see how it can be understood, and later on introduce other examples, which concern different issues.

Since its inclusion in Haidt's later book *The Happiness Hypothesis*<sup>1</sup> (2006, 21), the example has become quite popular.<sup>2</sup> And part of its appeal is, I suppose, that the

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<sup>1</sup> There are interesting differences, however, between the ways in which Haidt comments on the example in the paper and in the book. The most glaring one is this. In the original paper, Haidt (2001, 814) writes: 'Most people who hear the above story immediately say that it was wrong for the siblings to make love, and they then begin searching for reasons [...] They argue that Julie and Mark will be hurt, perhaps emotionally, even though the story makes it clear that no harm befell them.' This argument, however, is not present in the book, probably because Haidt has realised that the story does not make this clear, and is replaced by another argument (2006, 21): 'It's going to harm their relationship.' Here, Haidt can indeed reply that 'the sex has made the relationship stronger', but that only means that the argument in the original paper still stands. However, for reasons that will soon become obvious, I will not pursue that line of argument. (Thanks go to Natan Elgabsi, who pointed out to me that Haidt's example can be found in several of his writings and that there are differences between them.)

<sup>2</sup> The first time I seriously considered the example was when a group of students from a local high school visited our department at Åbo Akademi University, and one thing they wanted to discuss with us

question Haidt asks at the end seems to call for an answer. But it is precisely its being a real question that I would like to question. Here, the consideration of context is important, for it is in that way that we come to see that Haidt's question would never arise.

Why is it not a real question? Since their having had sex is a secret, only Julie and Mark can ask whether it was okay for them to make love. The question could not even be asked from a God's Eye point of view, for, if taken seriously, a belief in God means that there would then be no such thing as absolute secrecy. And if Julie or Mark asked the grammatically corresponding form of the last question – 'Was it okay for us to make love?' – it would have a very different import. Mark, if it is he who is asking himself this question, cannot take his own psychology as just a fact of the matter, as a fact that just has to be reckoned with;<sup>3</sup> who he is is partly determined by his way of relating to what they have done. Specifically, the character of their relationship is partly determined by his way of relating to what they have done. It can, of course, be said that the development of that relationship cannot be known, which means that Mark can only say that their having had sex has not yet affected their relationship badly. But there is a deeper point to be made: the very fact that he seriously considers whether it was okay for them to make love means a change to their relationship, no matter the outcome of these considerations. For example, the relationship is not as untroubled as before they had sex, when that question could not even have been asked. In other words, the question Haidt asks does not arise for anyone but, possibly, Julie and Mark, and if it arises for them, then it is not a fact of the matter that they 'feel even closer to each other', for the very asking the question means facing a worry that was not there before.<sup>4</sup> It

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was Haidt's question. My understanding of the example has thus been shaped by the philosophers then present, above all Martin Gustafsson, Camilla Kronqvist and Olli Lagerspetz. The point I am making in this paper concerning Haidt's example was my take on the example in those discussions.

**3** 'Just' is an important word here, of course. Knowing one's weak spots makes it possible for one to avoid situations one is likely to be unable to tackle, for example.

**4** As pointed out in a previous note, in his comment on the example, Haidt says that 'the sex has made the relationship stronger'. But this is, strictly speaking, not borne out by the wording of the example, in which it is only said that their secrecy has brought them closer to each other – a far less ambitious claim. (Haidt seems to confuse two very different senses of closeness. When closeness is a matter of love and friendship, the strength and the closeness of the relationship are two sides of the same coin, for there is not anything you cannot talk about with each other. By contrast, when closeness is a matter of secrecy, it is achieved by seeing to it that there will be something that you can only talk about with this specific person – in other words, it is achieved by the distance to others that the secrecy establishes. The very fact that you have hence shut yourself off from the rest of the world will then have repercussions on your relationship, repercussions that will be more straining the less trivial that which the secret concerns is, and secrecy thus potentially weakens the

is certainly possible that neither of them asks the question, but that would not help Haidt, for he needs the question to arise.

The kind of context I am focusing on here is that of the question (not primarily the context of, say, the action). Consequently, the kind of context I have in mind does not help us answer moral questions, indirectly at the most; rather, the kind of context I have in mind is essential for understanding the kind of question that arises – indeed, if any question arises at all. Specifically, the essential issues to consider are the following: For whom does the question arise? What form does the question have for him or her? What relation does the person for whom it arises have to the events in the example as described by the philosopher?<sup>5</sup>

One way to describe Haidt's trick, then, is to say that he describes the case more or less from the perspective of Julie and Mark but then, at the last instance, switches perspectives and asks whether it was okay for them to make love not from their point of view but from the point of view of someone else, who could not however describe the case in the way Haidt has described it.

Is there a way of modifying Haidt's example in order to save it? One way would be to modify the question he asks and instead formulate it strictly from Julie and Mark's perspective. What would that mean? We already know what Julie and Mark themselves think about the issue, because Haidt has told us, so the question cannot be whether they think it was okay for them to make love. So, the question must be, 'What would I say if I were Julie or Mark?' But this is trickier than it appears. For how much of myself am I allowed to take with me and still be Julie or Mark? On the one hand, I must take my own thinking with me; otherwise, we would be back where we started – with what Julie and Mark themselves think about the issue. On the other hand, there are things that are true of me that I cannot take with me when trying to imagine being Julie or Mark; for instance, I am not a woman (if I imagine being Julie), and I have no sister (if I imagine being Mark). Despite appearances, this is far from a trivial point. It entails a criticism of the idea that a moral problem on which it is possible to take a stand is there simply because a real (or sometimes not so real) life story has been given. Is it possible to put oneself in any kind of situation? What does it take to put oneself in the situation described in the example? And if I manage to put myself in the imagined situation, if I really experience it as someone involved would, does that mean that I have something sensible to say about it? Might not the very process by which I put myself in the imagined situation do away with the possibility of my having something to say

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relationship.) There are many such problems in the example, and it would be easy, but of less philosophical interest, to undermine it by pressing the exact formulations of it.

<sup>5</sup> These issues are discussed with deep insight in Baz (2012), but not in relation to moral philosophy. See also Wittgenstein (2009, §296).

about it? This problem is especially critical in the case of gruesome stories, as popular as these are in moral philosophy (providing the philosopher with what seems to be a shortcut to seriousness). There is an obvious tension here between the intellectual composure of philosophy, which is not an accidental feature, and the shattering, indeed destructive, nature of such experiences (resulting in, say, rancour, resignation, bitterness), which is also not an accidental feature. Does not a clear-sighted understanding of such experiences that also stays true to them require that I go through them to the full without being destroyed?<sup>6</sup> There is thus a grave danger of what is supposed to lead to moral seriousness in fact leading away from it, especially since the gruesome example, if of a situation far removed from the life one is leading, risks having a distancing effect rather than bringing existential relevance.

In the case we are discussing, these problems specifically concern the fact that one important question to consider is what having sex would do to one's relationship to one's brother (as a sister) or to one's sister (as a brother); or, to be more exact, not what it would do to *one's* relationship, but what it would do to *my* relationship to *Mark* (as *Julie*) or to *Julie* (as *Mark*), for what we are considering here is what I would say if I were Julie or Mark, and that is not a general question. Now, I do not think that imagining myself having a brother–sister relationship (as a sister or a brother) would in any way be impossible, but to do so would take much more than just the few lines provided by Haidt. Understanding another's situation – say, what his sister means to him – need not be difficult, but understanding what it would mean to me to have a sister would be more akin to writing a novel about these issues. Is this a difficulty that does not affect others – for example, a woman who has a brother? She would not be affected by it if it were possible for her to generalise from her relation to her brother to any possible sister–brother relation – in this case, to her relation, as Julie, to Mark. But the way of determining whether this is possible or not would be to try to see whether the specifics of her relationship with her brother make an essential difference or not, that is, to try to imagine a very different sister–brother relationship. Above all, although it is certainly not difficult for me to imagine having sex with the brother I have, in the sense of seeing in my mind's eye what it would look like, what I need to imagine is having sex with him because I think that it 'would be interesting and fun'. And I do not think that that can be *imagined*. Of course, after having dwelt on the issue for some time, I may start thinking that it would be interesting and fun, but that is not to *imagine* thinking that it would be interesting and fun.<sup>7</sup> And that makes even more unclear what I try to do when I imagine being either Julie or Mark and answering the question from their perspective.

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this point, see Strandberg (2016, 32–33).

<sup>7</sup> This goes generally for thoughts, beliefs, wants, desires, and so on: what would it be to imagine oneself having other thoughts (and so on) than the ones one is having?.

### 3 Philosophy and Theatre

There is an important point to be made against the background of the discussion in the previous paragraph: I see something as a moral question only if I see answering it as committing me to something, as involving responsibility, as making a real difference, as mattering.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the intricacies involved in imagining what I would say if I were Julie or Mark, it is therefore possible to question whether I am answering a moral question at all when approaching Haidt's example in this way, for as long as I only speak as somebody else, I do not commit myself to anything. This means that if one wants to do moral philosophy, it is not enough to present a case and take a stand on it (or ask the reader to do so). What is needed is an example that actually implicates me as a writer and thereby, if read creatively, the reader too.

What does this mean in practice? Comparing a good philosophical example with a theatre play might be revealing here.<sup>9</sup> There are undoubtedly important similarities. In a play, there is no narrative voice. All I have is what I see and hear, and it is up to me how it is to be understood. (There is the title, of course, which might influence one's understanding of what happens on the stage, so it is a good idea to avoid giving a title to one's philosophical example.) In the dramatic text, there will be some stage directions, but the house in which the action takes place, described in the stage directions as dilapidated, or a laugh, described as scornful, is not tagged in that way when seen and heard. Stage directions are therefore better avoided in a philosophical text. Why? Haidt's example shows the risks involved in not minding this issue. Let me just point to two details. Towards the end, Haidt writes that their having had sex 'makes them feel even closer to each other'. But in real life, things are not as simple as that. Of course, two people might say – to each other, to others and to themselves – that they are very close, but things may lead me to believe otherwise. If what we had were just what Julie and Mark are saying to each other, a dramatic text without stage directions as it were, Haidt would not be able to state as an established fact that they are now closer to each other than before. And this is not an issue without relevance to the question he asks at the end.

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**8** This means that to see something as a moral question is to have already taken a moral stand – a fact of important implications for moral philosophy.

**9** Cf. Beckwith (2011, 8): 'I see a natural affinity between the practices of theater and the practices of ordinary language philosophy because each practice is committed to examining particular words used by particular speakers in particular situations.' Now, I would not describe what I am calling for 'ordinary language philosophy', but Beckwith's point is still relevant, for the contrast she is after is the contrast between some kind of conceptual analysis, on the one hand, and the attempt at coming to a better understanding of what people say and do to each other in real situations, on the other hand (cf. Wittgenstein 2009, § 94).

How you understand the situation, whether or not you take there to be a moral question there at all, and if so, how the question goes, are not external elements to answering that question but integral to it. If the philosopher has already stated how the situation is to be understood and asks the moral question against such a background, she has already excluded other takes on the situation. The other detail is that Haidt writes that ‘they decide not to do it again’. This is not as problematic as the first detail, but hearing how they reached that decision would still be relevant to the understanding of the possible problems involved. What I am after is not the explicit reasons for the decision, which would only require Haidt to add a line or two, but what Julie and Mark actually said to each other when discussing the issue. Haidt needs this decision to be reached without their discussion showing, explicitly or implicitly, that there are things that worry them, but it is only possible to determine what their discussion shows if one has heard it, and a perceptive theatregoer might be able to read between the lines.

There is no narrative voice in a play, but sometimes there is something that has a comparable effect. If the scenes take place at very different times and locations, their juxtaposition might lead us to understand them in a different way than if we really had to live through the intervening time and do the required travelling, as we would in real life. Especially risky are two scenes that take place at the same time, which might give rise to questions that could never arise in that form in real life. In philosophy, then, it is a good idea to respect the classical unities of time and space.

However, there are important differences between a good philosophical example and a play. First of all, to the extent that philosophy is written, it only corresponds to the dramatic text, and there is, of course, an important difference between that text and the play as performed. This difference easily leads to an intellectualist mistake in philosophy, either by only focusing on the spoken lines (a mistake that my advice to avoid stage directions in the philosophical text might lead to if not noticed) or by believing that a scornful laugh is there under the description of being a scornful laugh (the mistake I discussed above).

The most important difference between a good philosophical example and a play, also as performed, concerns the fourth wall. In the theatre, I am there in the capacity of audience, but in real life, it is possible for me to intervene and try to stop what is going on or to simply cut in and take part in the conversation. Or I can abstain from doing so, but I do not *abstain* from intervening in the action on the stage. And in real life, I may be addressed directly. All of this concerns the issue of commitment and responsibility mentioned above. Reality makes demands on me, but the fictional reality does not (which is not to deny that fiction could make demands on me in other ways). Even if we succeeded in turning Haidt’s example into a play – a play that might leave me with the question of whether it was okay for them to make love when I exit the theatre – a real-life situation would still be very



different. For what is my relation to what is going on? We might imagine my sneaking around the cabin in France and when I hear them discussing making love, rushing in and telling them, ‘Don’t do it! It would be a mistake!’ Or we might imagine Julie and Mark, back home in the USA, talking about their vacation and their having had sex, and my overhearing them. Some months later, Julie seems depressed, and I tell her, ‘Perhaps you are worrying over your having had sex with Mark ... Well, I happened to hear you talking to Mark about it ... But don’t worry, it was okay for you to make love’. All this is certainly possible, but it is clear that the questions involved – ‘Should I intervene? What should I say?’ – are very different from the question Haidt asks us to consider, different precisely because my relation to the events, and to Julie and Mark, is now no longer the relation that a member of the audience has to what happens on the stage.

A further difference is that a play has an ending, but life does not.<sup>10</sup> Death is not an ending in the relevant sense here, for just as the play might continue after the death of one of the characters, life will go on after my death. (So, if life has an ending, it would be something like the Last Judgement.) We might hence imagine Haidt’s story turned into a play with a happy ending, but as a real-life case, one’s understanding of where the story of Mark and Julie ends – indeed, if it has an ending at all – is not independent of one’s understanding of the moral issues involved.

## 4 Another Example

To show that the problems Haidt runs into are not a unique feature of his example, let me now discuss another one. This will also give me the opportunity to give some more flesh to the comparison between a philosophical example and a play. The example is more or less randomly chosen, found in a paper I read for other purposes, and even though I will critically discuss the example, the paper is in other respects insightful. Trudy Govier and Colin Hirano write:

[I]f a man forgets to mow the lawn, he has made a mistake, but would likely be insulted if his wife announced to him that he is forgiven for this omission. The wrong is so minor that to speak of needing to rebuild a relationship after such an error is rather grandiose and the implicit assumption – that the wife is in a position to reprimand and instruct her husband in moral affairs – can be offensive. In fact, an offering of such ‘forgiveness’ might be given and received as a kind of passive aggression – a way of making the point that one is in the right and has the moral upper hand, while spuriously implying that one is non-confrontational and conciliatory. (Govier and Hirano 2008, 435)

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<sup>10</sup> Already Aristotle was aware of some of these problems; see Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1100a10–30.

What is happening here? Let us imagine a short dialogue:

W: 'Did you remember to mow the lawn?'

M: 'Damn! ... I know I said I would, but I forgot. I'm such an idiot!'

W: 'Don't be so hard on yourself, you are forgiven for not remembering.'

M: 'I know you despise me ... and now you say that you *forgive* me!'

Now let us imagine that I am sitting there, as a friend of the couple:

I: 'Why did he react like that ... shouting, running away and slamming the door? You only tried to be kind ... the most unlikely behaviour!'

W: 'Well, not so unlikely, I'm afraid ... You know, sometimes he's really difficult. He hears implicit assumptions in everything I say. Sometimes I try to weigh my words really carefully, and perhaps what I just said was a bit clumsy, perhaps it sounded rather grandiose (as a philosopher friend of mine sometimes says). But all too often he thinks that I bear him a grudge, and whatever I say to show that it is not so only makes things worse. I don't know what to do ...'

This dialogue ends here, with us sitting quietly for a while and then starting to talk about other things. But let us imagine that I followed the man as he exited, and now, in another room, he says to me:

M: 'Again! It's always like this!'

I: 'Is it only the lawn, or do you quarrel about other things too?'

M: 'Of course there are other things too! But I didn't mean only that, I also meant that I lost my temper again. It's just like me, but I know that it doesn't make things any better. I don't know ... perhaps she doesn't *always* mean what she seems to be saying ... perhaps her damn talk about forgiveness can be taken as a good sign ...'

We leave him and me here – many different ways of continuing the play are possible. What have we learnt? Even if there is a specific reaction that is likely to occur, the person who reacts in that way has a very different relation to the reaction than only registering its occurrence (as we see in the man's last lines), and this also means that those who interact with the person who reacts in that way have a different relation to it, for causally influencing the reaction and the situation that gives rise to it is not the only option that is open to them (as we see in the wife's last lines). Furthermore, whether a reaction is likely or not, whether there is an implicit assumption in what someone is saying or not, whether 'you are forgiven' is an offensive utterance or not, all require a good deal of soul-searching by the people involved (or by someone not so involved, such as myself in

the above example) and reflection on their relations to each other; the answers are not given prior to the events themselves, as Govier and Hirano seem to think.<sup>11</sup>

A narrator might, of course, simply state that what someone said was offensive, but this only shows the risks involved in having a narrator in a philosophical example, for real-life utterances are not tagged in this way. (Even if I say that I am now offending you, what I say need not be offensive.) If someone says something that sounds offensive to me but takes it back as soon as I confront him, I will sometimes think that he changed his mind, sometimes that he is just a coward, sometimes that I misunderstood or misheard what he said, sometimes that it sounded offensive but was in fact not. (One reason this is so is because what I form an understanding of is not primarily an utterance but our ongoing relation, a relation of, say, friendship.) There are, of course, more possibilities than these four, and the grey areas between them are far from insignificant. This means that the question of whether an utterance was offensive or not may very well be – or become – indeterminate. If the narrator states that the utterance was offensive, she has thus precluded the people involved from shaping the meaning of the utterance by what they say and do. By contrast, if the example is written as a dialogue, it is up to me to make up my mind whether what was said was offensive or not, also against the background of how the person addressed reacts and what happens later. The conclusion I come to here, however, will be rather artificial, for in a real-life case, even if I am somewhat of a spectator, the understanding I form will show itself in how I speak and act in relation to the people involved, which means that the meaning of the situation will not be shaped independently of me.

## 5 Giving Advice

Now, someone might criticise me for having misunderstood what a philosophical example is supposed to be. My mistake would then be that I have understood Julie and Mark to be something like real people, whereas the story Haidt tells us is just a more colourful way of asking a general question: ‘Is it okay to have sex with one’s brother (if one is a woman) or sister (if one is a man) if certain requirements are fulfilled (one has seen to it that the risk of pregnancy is minimal,<sup>12</sup> etc.)?’ In one

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**11** In the last sentence in the above quotation, Govier and Hirano talk about what ‘might’ be the case, which, if only meant to remind us of a possibility, is correct. But the first two sentences are less careful.

**12** This is the way I suppose that Haidt would phrase it, but I might, of course, be mistaken. In any case, speaking of pregnancy as a ‘risk’ is not self-evident.

sense, this is right: it is probably what Haidt takes himself to be doing. But my question is then simply, ‘When does such a general question arise?’

One context in which it might arise is that of advice. People might turn up and ask for my advice, and even though it is possible to approach that possibility in many ways, it is no doubt possible – though arguably unwise – to have a ready answer to give to anyone.

The problem for Haidt, however, is that such a ready answer is an answer to a different question than the one he is asking. To show this, let us imagine that a guy named Mark turns up and wants to hear what I have to say about an issue he has been preoccupied with. There are two possibilities here, so let us first discuss the issue of his having sex with his sister Julie in the future. Now, I do not think that this is very realistic, for in order for my answer to be of a general kind, Mark must be anyone, not someone I know well, and I do not know why someone I do not know would want to discuss this issue with me – except perhaps a drunk Mark at the pub, with whom it is not possible to have a serious discussion anyway. Furthermore, that Mark seems to want to discuss this as if Julie has no say makes me rather worried. But strange and worrying things sometimes happen, so now this Mark, whom I do not know very well, if at all, is sitting here and wants to hear my thoughts on the issue. What should I say? People will no doubt say different things to Mark, but I doubt if one of them would just be ‘It’s okay’. If one finds the situation awkward, one might want to get rid of him as soon as possible, of course, and that would be the import of such a response; if he has taken the trouble to come and see me, he does not take the issue lightly, and just saying ‘It’s okay’ would merely be to brush him off. There are obviously questions that trouble Mark and that he wants to discuss, so whether having sex with his sister Julie is okay or not is simply not the main issue; it is at most a question that will have received an indirect answer after these main concerns have been addressed.

The second possibility is that the issue Mark has been preoccupied with and wants to hear my opinion about concerns his having had sex with his sister Julie. What is at stake here is not clear, however. Since they have ‘decide[d] not to do it again’, what is at stake is not whether Mark and Julie should have sex again. Haidt writes that they ‘feel even closer to each other’, but perhaps there is some problem in their relationship that Mark wants to talk about? Or is he troubled because he takes himself to have acted irresponsibly and endangered their relationship by having had sex with Julie? If so, that might in turn raise new questions, of whether that irresponsible way of acting is a sign of a character trait that he has to work on or whether there is a way to minimise the possible damage. These are only some examples of questions that might arise, and there are certainly many more, and of different kinds. But I have a hard time seeing that the question of whether it was okay or not to have sex with Julie will be one of them. Of course, Mark might come

to me with a vague sense of discomfort that he is only able to articulate as a question of whether what they did was okay or not. But our discussion will not end there, for we will try to find out what his discomfort concerns, and perhaps what it should concern as well. And in a way, Haidt realises this, for he has set up the example precisely to make the question of whether it was okay for them to make love devoid of any content, hence knowing that if he succeeded, it would make his question impossible to answer. But my reply is simply that this very fact shows that the central question is not one phrased in those terms.

This, I believe, is not only true of this case, for as soon as we try to imagine a concrete situation in which people worry about moral questions and talk to each other about them, we see that the main question is not one about what is okay and not okay (or about what is right and wrong). To be of any significance, such abstract concepts must be given some content, and the main question is therefore what to say about the situation in the light of the content, not what to say about it in terms of concepts such as ‘okay’.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, I think that the context of moral advice is often a helpful one in order to see what a moral question might come to in practice. What advice would I give someone who wants to hear what I think about this and that issue? The importance of this question is that it establishes a relation between me and the moral issue; this is certainly not the only way of establishing such a relation, but without such a relation, answering the question does not commit me to anything, nothing will be at stake for me in answering it, and the answer would therefore be gratuitous. It establishes such a relation between me and the moral issue by establishing a relation between me and the people involved – in this case, a relation to Mark and Julie. What I say to Mark is serious to the extent that I care about them, to the extent that it is an expression of love. In a real-life situation, I will get involved in this way whether I want to or not because as soon as Mark turns up and tells me about what is preoccupying him, I can respond to him either conscientiously or not, but I am no longer able to have a neutral attitude towards him. By contrast, in an imagined case, the presence of a real human being is lacking. One difference this makes is that in the imagined case, the situation is easily regarded in isolation, whereas in real life, the situation of advice does not bring the involvement to an end, for their life will now be, in various ways, part of mine. In other words, what is at stake for me is that the advice I give (or do not give) will make me responsible for what will happen – not in the same way as Mark, of course, for Julie is not a sister of mine, and it is not I who have had, or am thinking about having, sex with her – and will form my relation to Mark and to Julie. Even if I had a ready answer to give to anyone, the meaning of that answer is thus not to be

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<sup>13</sup> For this last point, cf. Cook (1999, 133–135).

separated from what is at stake for me right now, which means that we do not have two issues, first the general one of whether it is okay to have sex with one's brother or sister if certain requirements are fulfilled and then a question of how that answer should be applied in this case and turned into a useful piece of advice, for what that ready answer comes to will not be clear until it is confronted by the situation that it is about. What is at stake for me, however, might also be understood in a superficial way, as a question of what advice I dare to give, if I fear that the person I give it to will take offence. For in that case, I still know what advice I would like to give, and there are thus indeed two separate questions.<sup>14</sup>

## 6 The Historical Context

Another context in which a general question might arise is that of legislation. But it is clear that Haidt has deliberately formulated his question in such a way as to avoid this context. If they had not kept 'that night as a special secret', people might object to what Julie and Mark did with reference to the risk of punishment, and Haidt does not want that objection to be applicable. In other words, the general question that might arise in the context of legislation is not of the same kind as Haidt's question.

In excluding that context, Haidt is also excluding the wider historical and cultural context, that is, the fact that what Julie and Mark did would be met with disapproval in certain times and places but not in others. That fact may, however, be seen as crucial, especially if one claims that this is not just a question of disapproval but of the very identification of what they did, an identification that is internally related to a specific social norm. The cultural context entails the identification of what they did as incest, and hence Haidt's question would have an answer: it was not okay for them to 'make love', for that description of what they did is misleading; what they did was commit incest.

From what I have written thus far, it should be clear that I reject such an argument. For it is merely another example of what I have criticised. To put the criticism in slightly different terms, moral philosophers often try to fix the conditions of their examples in order to be able to ask a moral question against the background of these conditions and thus determine what moral weight these specific conditions have. Universalists, particularists and relativists are not in disagreement on this point; they merely see the contents of these conditions in different ways. But what I have tried to show is that in real life, the conditions are

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<sup>14</sup> This point, about the relation between a person's moral judgement and the situation of which she is speaking, is helpfully discussed in Hertzberg (2002, especially sec. 4).

not fixed.<sup>15</sup> Asking oneself a moral question will change the conditions (the alleged closeness of Mark and Julie), and what the conditions are and how they are to be understood are not independent of the moral issue (the alleged offensiveness of certain utterances). In other words, to what extent a cultural identification cum social norm exists is partly constituted by how I relate to the issue it concerns, and what moral importance the social norm has, if any, is not given by the existence of it. For if someone sees ‘language [...] as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what’ (McDowell 1996, 126), and thus the existence of the concept of incest as a reason for abstaining from having sex with one’s sibling, the same concept and the same social norm might be seen by someone else as a reason for having sex with one’s sibling, making it into more than sex – a protest against oppressive sexual mores.<sup>16</sup> The social norm states what is, say, mandatory, permissible, tolerated or prohibited, but this leaves the moral issue untouched. What human beings do, say and think, for good and for evil, makes its impression on human language; one, but not the only, way of convincing someone of something is to make use of such morally loaded terms, but to the extent that what you are trying to convey is insightful and not, say, chauvinistic, it is not insightful by virtue of the existence of these specific terms.

## 7 Conclusion

What I have tried to point to in this paper is the importance of thinking from an existentially and morally engaged perspective, from the point of view where something is really at stake. (That should be understood in contrast to a God’s Eye point of view, if it were not for the fact that a religious criticism could be directed at the idea that God is an existentially and morally disengaged spectator.) Such a point of view is not really possible to choose to take up or not, for it is only there that the questions will arise at all, as I have tried to show. To the extent that the philosopher is indeed addressing a moral question, she will hence be involved in those difficulties she writes about, and the involvement concerns her relation to people, not merely to theoretical questions. Life and philosophical thinking often diverge, but insofar as the latter is no mere sham, the way in which the philosopher understands the examples she writes about is just as revealing of who she is

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<sup>15</sup> Even if Gilligan does not stress it, this is, as I see it, one of the insights in Amy’s response to the ‘dilemma’ presented to her; see Gilligan (1993, 27–32).

<sup>16</sup> A related, but not identical, criticism of McDowell would be that he fails to notice that bad reasons are reasons too, which means that the word ‘wisdom’ is a seriously misleading one to use here.

morally as the way she relates to people in real life is. This is why doing moral philosophy is challenging.

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