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# The Difficulty of Understanding Complexity and Simplicity in Moral Psychological Description

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**ABSTRACT:** The social intuitionist approach to moral judgments advanced by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt presupposes that it is possible to provide an explanation of the human moral sense without normative implications. By contrast, Iris Murdoch's philosophical work on moral psychology suggests that every description of morality necessarily involves evaluative features that reveal the thinker's own moral attitudes and implicit philosophical pictures. In the light of this, we contend that Haidt's treatment of the story about Julie and Mark, two siblings who decide to have casual, protected, and in his view harmless sex, provides a too simplistic picture of what is involved in understanding human morality. Despite his aim to explain the roots of moral judgments, he fails to provide a deeper understanding of morality in two different respects. First, he does so by suggesting that his story contains all the relevant information needed to take a moral stand on it, and by rejecting as irrelevant the wider human context in which questions about sexual and family relations arise. Second, he simplifies the responses of the people who are subject to his experiment by disregarding their various reasons for disapproving and by equating understanding human morality with explaining an impersonal psychological process.

**KEY WORDS:** understanding, moral psychology, moral description, Iris Murdoch, Jonathan Haidt

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## Introduction

How difficult is it to understand human morality, and in what does this difficulty reside? Present attempts to explain the workings of morality within empirical moral psychology, often presuppose that it is possible to give a description of the human moral sense without normative implications (see e.g. Haidt 2013, 316; Haidt and Pinker 2016). Thus, they suggest that the matter of explaining the roots of morality, although it may be improved by theoretical and methodological reconsiderations, does not itself pose to us any potentially ethical questions about what is involved in reaching an understanding of what is entailed in moral reflection. This runs contrary to more phenomenological and hermeneutic stances in continental philosophy. According to these the question of understanding different forms of human thought and practice poses a crucial challenge to any academic discipline attempting to describe aspects of human life, since it requires us to address the question of what it means to understand another person and her experiences (see e.g. Dilthey 1922; Spranger 1980; Scheler 2017; Winch 2008). From such a perspective, considerations as to what is involved in understanding the moral lives of persons are not reducible to, but rather prior to any form of explanation of a general sub-personal system (see Backström et al. 2019).

Here, we will supplement the approach offered by phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics with the viewpoint of philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. Murdoch is an early, but often not fully appreciated, interpreter of the philosophical and ethical issues concerned when exploring questions regarding our moral psychology. Attending to the evaluative features of the language present in our descriptions of human psychology, Murdoch proposed that no philosophical or psychological description of morality can ever be purely descriptive. It is by necessity expressive of the thinker's own moral attitudes and implicit philosophical pictures about what characterizes human life and thought. These considerations extend to how we understand a particular person, and how we construe understanding human beings more generally. They also surface in the analysis of moral understanding and the difficulty of understanding we find illuminative and satisfactory. Therefore, a central feature of moral reflection is to explore the conceptual frameworks we use to investigate the thoughts and actions of other people,

to make ourselves aware of the philosophical pictures that implicitly lead our descriptions of the central features of morality and moral reasoning. (See Bagnoli 2012 and Diamond 1996; 2010 for an overview of what such an exploration could entail).

In the light of this more complicated vision of what is involved in understanding human morality, we contend that the simplified thought experiments used in empirical moral psychology to garner results that help explain the foundations of morality (cf. Huebner 2011), involve a reduction of the moral character of our reflection and reasoning. We exemplify this attitude by analyzing the theoretical perspective and methodological starting points of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, as they take shape in the story about Julie and Mark, two siblings who decide to have casual, protected, and in his view harmless sex.

We bring out two respects in which Haidt's underlying picture of morality circumscribes his description of moral reflection and underplays the evaluative features of his language use. The first concerns his treatment of the story, the second his treatment of the responses of the research subjects to it. In the first part, we submit that Haidt simplifies what is happening in the fictive relationship between Julie and Mark, by treating a richer context as irrelevant to understanding the characters of his story. This makes it difficult for the readers to take a moral stand on the story. In the second part, we show that Haidt simplifies what is involved in giving reasons for thinking that something is morally wrong, by treating the reasons the persons subject to his experiment give as irrelevant for gaining moral understanding. This, we argue, is a consequence of him taking understanding "the human moral sense", or "human moral life" (Haidt 2001, 829) to consist in explaining the psychological process of an intuitive approval or disapproval.

By contrast to Haidt's view of what is involved in understanding other people's moral responses and actions, we suggest that the failure to understand someone is not merely an intellectual failure. Murdoch's suggestion that the one who does not take into consideration how people think of their own actions is inattentive to their vision of life, rather introduces the matter of understanding in a way that is constitutively moral.

## 1. Taking examples too easily

The story about Julie and Mark originates in an unpublished study in social psychology (Haidt, Bjorklund and Murphy 2000). It is cited by Haidt on several occasions (2001, 814; 2006, 20–21; 2013, 45), with slight variations in the wording of the final question. The variation of the story we focus on appears in his widely cited article, “The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment” (2001), in which Haidt uses the results from the study to argue for what he terms a social intuitionist approach to moral judgments. This approach is a form of present-day sentimentalism, in which Haidt defends the Humean claim that our moral judgments in the end are based on emotional reactions. The story with which he begins his more theoretical discussion reads,

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 both 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)

When confronted with the story, Haidt says, most people immediately react to what Julie and Mark did as wrong. When they try to give reasons for thinking so, however, they point to possible harms of incest, harms that the story states are not involved. This leaves the research subjects in a state of what Haidt calls “moral dumbfounding”. Many say things like “I don’t know, I can’t explain it, I just know it’s wrong.” (Haidt, Björklund and Murphy 2000; Haidt 2001, 814; Sommers 2005; Haidt and Björklund 2008, 197–198; Haidt 2013, 29, 47).

On the bases of these reactions, Haidt rejects the rationalist models of morality that, according to him, dominate philosophy and psychology (Haidt 2001, 815–816). The rationalist models, he submits, presuppose that moral judgments are caused by a “process” of “moral reasoning” (Haidt 2001, 818). However, since there, to him, is no acceptable reason for objecting to the story

of Julie and Mark, that is, a reason that points out that their actions cause harm, the research subjects can give no reason for thinking it was not OK. This leads him to conclude that moral judgment is not caused by a “process” of “moral reasoning”, but rather by a “process” of “moral intuition” (Haidt 2001, 818, see Stanley et al. 2019, 121, fn 3, 126, for a criticism of depicting this as a causal relationship). Intuition to Haidt is a “kind of cognition, but it is not a kind of reasoning” (Haidt 2001, 814. Cf. Haidt and Björklund 2008, 200; Haidt and Kesebir 2010, 802; Haidt 2013, 56.) In this social intuitionist approach, “moral reasoning” is a form of post-hoc rationalization generated after the moral judgment has been intuitively made (Haidt 2001, 829).

Haidt’s model, and the setup of his experiment have been criticized from different perspectives both within psychology (Royzman et al. 2015; Stanley et al. 2019) and philosophy (Huebner 2011; Jacobson 2008; 2012; Jusaszek 2016). Alternative models for explaining the system underlying our moral responses have also been suggested (Greene et al. 2009; Hennig and Hütter 2020; Tetlock et. al. 2000). What interests us here, however, is not possible flaws in the empirical design of his study (Royzman et al. 2015), or alternative ways of fitting his empirical results to some pre-existing philosophical theory (Stanley et al. 2019). Neither do we take a stand on how one philosophically should consider the role of emotion, or intuition in moral judgment (Kronqvist 2017). What interests us is rather the philosophical and ethical ramifications of the telling of this story, as well as the philosophical presuppositions about morality guiding Haidt’s choice and use of it.

Haidt’s interpretation of the results of this study stirs debates about how empirical psychological research should matter for philosophical conceptualization (Kauppinen 2014; Sie 2014). He offers them as evidence for and against different philosophical positions, and thus assumes that the facts he and his colleagues present should matter for theory. By contrast, we emphasize that results produced by an empirical study are already determined by theory. They suggest deeply held philosophical positions that often go unacknowledged. Therefore, when Haidt presents his results as facts of human moral life, he fails to acknowledge that these facts are not simple products of our life. They are as much products of his theoretical and methodological framework, his definitions and operationalizations. Given that we accept these as legitimate, there is of course nothing stopping us

from considering his results as facts. It is, however, not these facts that give him his methodology.

Many have remarked on the utilitarian strand in Haidt's thinking, in its focus on harmful consequences for determining the right action (Jusaszek 2016). Haidt himself also advocates a form of Durkheimian utilitarianism on a political level (Haidt 2013, 316). More central to our concern, however, is his general emphasis on moral reflection as a means of passing judgments on actions and consequences of actions, and on other judgments and their underlying mental causes. Attending to these underlying assumptions about morality and the role they play in the creation of empirical facts, is necessary to think lucidly about what may be philosophically gathered about our moral psychology on the basis of this and similar empirical studies. Reconsidering the language offered by standard normative and metaethical theories to capture what is central to moral reflection, may as well prove necessary to account for diverging aspects of our moral psychology. (Landy and Uhlman 2018 offer a similar criticism of moral psychological accounts as being action centered. They suggest that moral judgments serve to characterize virtues. Cf. Cray 2007; 2016; Diamond 1988; 1995abc; 2003; Gaita 2004; Winch 1989, especially chapter 4-5, for expositions of what is central to moral reflection that lie close to what our alternative would be to focusing judgment on action.)

The story of Julie and Mark is intentionally set up to fend off any of the standard objections one could raise against sexual intercourse between two siblings (Haidt 2013, 46; Sommers 2005). In response to the argument that the siblings may be hurt in some way, perhaps emotionally, Haidt even asserts that "the story makes it clear that no harm befell them" (Haidt 2001, 814). For Haidt, there are no reasons people can give why it is harmful, except their feelings of its being so. Haidt, thereby, invites us to think of the story as one containing all the relevant information that is needed to judge whether a sexual relationship between brother and sister is OK.

Yet, it is precisely on this point that one can question the story. In our ordinary life, the reflection on what is relevant information, and how to determine whether we do indeed have all the relevant information, is itself a moral issue. Even more, we are often challenged to see just what the moral issue is in a specific situation, or whether we do indeed face a moral problem

(cf. Rosaldo 1997, 143–144). Thinking through the following imagined situations may clarify these moral features of the story about Julie and Mark. They also bring to the table some tensions that unintentionally appear to be introduced in it.

Imagine that Julie and Mark are not brother and sister, but friends. They are also friends of mine (Kronqvist). Suppose that Julie one day confesses to me that she and Mark have made love, on similar premises as the ones in Haidt's story. She wonders whether it was OK for them to do it? Now, the most obvious response on my part would be to ask why she raises that question. This is an obvious response since there are several contexts in which this question would not arise. If she, for instance, tells me this as part of a story of how they came to fall in love, the worry that this was not OK is already precluded. We may, however, imagine several possible situations in which the question does arise, and gives Julie reason to worry.

*Scenario 1.* She tells me that Mark had been a tender lover in all possible respects, but that he, during love making repeatedly, had made a sound that from the first moment struck her as ridiculous. This had distracted her and made it difficult for her to take the act seriously. Even if they had agreed that everything was fine afterwards, she now kept hearing that sound every time she looked at him. It made her want to laugh. She was afraid this might create an unbridgeable gap in their friendship.

*Scenario 2.* She tells me that the love making started in a tender way, but that Mark at a point had turned rougher. He started to say “dirty things” to her, and at some point, also slapped her. She had been surprised and had not said anything about it during the act. In part, she said, she had also enjoyed it, although she admitted feeling ashamed to confess it now. Afterwards, however, she noticed that she could not stop thinking about what happened. She felt, she said, degraded. This, she added, was not only an effect of what he had done, or how she had felt. Rather, she thought it had revealed an unexpected side of him that she had trouble accepting. The thought that precisely he had believed that she would appreciate such language and behavior both unnerved and appalled her. Especially, it brought to mind previous conversations they had had where both had agreed that mainstream pornography is very often misogynic in its representation of what men and women want from sex. She could not make sense of his behavior in the light of these remarks.



*Scenario 3.* She tells me that although she had taken the decision to have sex quite lightly, partly induced by considerable amounts of alcohol, something had changed after the act. When he, quite casually, had put his arm around her, she had felt a warmth and longing she was not expecting. When the next morning he had suggested that although the sex was good, it was probably for the best not to do it again, she had readily agreed. When he started talking, however, she admitted that she first had wished him to suggest that they would be something more than only friends. She did not know what to make of her feelings.

If I am Julie's friend and she tells me one of these stories, there are many things for me to say, and many things to feel. Indeed, if I imagine Julie's story as one being told by my real friends, I can imagine quite different reactions, depending on which of my friends it concerns, their personal histories and relationships, the relationship I have to them, the occasion when I would learn about it, and so on. I can also think of more or less appropriate reactions. I hope, for instance, that I would not be too disturbed by what I am told, to be able to listen to the story as a true friend. A more awkward response would be feeling jealous about Julie's sexual experience with Mark.

How I would react to any of these stories in a real situation, is an empirical question, as is the question how anyone else would react. Our interest in these scenarios, however, is not in determining the range of possible responses that may be revealed in an empirical study. Neither is it in the ethically more normative question about whether it was OK for the Julie of our stories to enter a sexual relationship with Mark, or whether some of my envisioned reactions are more appropriate than others according to some moral norm or standard. Our concern is rather with the role the evaluative features of the descriptions used in explicating the experiences, actions and reactions of the particular sexual relationship have in these three cases, as well as with the evaluative features of the possible re-descriptions I, or someone else, may offer against the backdrop of them.

Suppose, for instance, that I, in the first scenario, tell Julie off for being "foolish" for "getting hung up on something so silly". Compare this with urging her to see that in the second one "he was being abusive", or just "acting like a jerk". Consider the argument that may ensue when I, in the third scenario, tell her that she was perhaps "falling in love with him", at the same time as another

friend rebukes her for only “telling herself it might be something more”. All these descriptions and re-descriptions of what happened suggest various paths our thinking morally about these scenarios may follow. They suggest different evaluations that may actualize in thinking through the stories.

The sheer possibility of making such varied descriptions of their situation, we here suggest, with Murdoch, invokes “the great *variety of the concepts that make up a morality*” (1997c, 73). They draw attention to how critical the words we use to describe or re-describe a situation is for our moral evaluation of it. If in the concrete contexts of our life, we are asked to respond to whether it was OK for someone to do something, considering such questions about how best to describe what happened, is critical in order to make sense of what it means for them to be raising this question as well as the kind of question they are raising. Is it, say, really a moral question, and if so what could serve as a morally appropriate response to it? Listening to their answers, and the terms in which they frame their answer, even realizing that they do not have an answer, is as critical to this endeavor.

Thus, we cannot exclude as a matter of principle that these concerns about how to describe what happened between our Julie and Mark, are of no relevance to the kind of study that Haidt wishes to pursue. Attempting to judge whether what they did was wrong, or not OK, only gives a limited view into the kind of moral questions the different scenarios may raise. The questions, in any of the envisioned scenarios, whether what happened between them would harm their friendship, or whether she or he in different ways had betrayed their friendship require different kinds of judgment than the mere judgment that their act under a certain description was wrong. The uncertainty surrounding whether Mark’s way of acting was, for instance, abusive is quite different from the acknowledgment that saw as a form of abuse it was not OK. (Cf. Hertzberg 2013, 163, who rejects the suggestion that someone may not know that abuse, or in his case betrayal, is wrong as a “philosopher’s fantasy.”)

It might be objected from someone sympathetic to Haidt’s aims, that what we are doing in suggesting these scenarios is altering the original story in such a way that they are no longer comparable. In our scenario, we introduce doubt and hesitation, mixed feelings and emotions, whereas such hesitation is lacking in the original story. Does not Haidt’s story “make

clear” that they enjoyed having sex? That their decision not to do it again was mutual? And that they grew closer after this? We are aware of this. Yet, that is precisely our problem. By contrast to saying that we know enough about how two people, not to say two siblings, felt about their love-making if we are told that they enjoyed it, we suggest that we actually know too little to be able to make a moral judgment. (See Strandberg 2020, for a similar criticism of the unclarities called forth by the suggestion that we take this as a moral question.)

One thing we do not know is how we are supposed to determine that this is the case. Haidt’s story introduces an omniscient observer, someone who states with certainty what they felt. “They enjoyed it.” “The decision was mutual.” Nevertheless, it is not clear what underlies these general descriptions. Who says this, and how does that person know? Does he base such a claim on observation or on hearsay? Suppose I hear the story about my friends from another friend, saying the same thing as in Haidt’s story. Then I may take my friend’s word for it, but I may also be skeptical about what my friend says and call it into doubt. I may go on to raise other questions. “How did Julie look when she said it?” I may even refuse to take my friend’s word for it. “Yes, I know she might have said so, but what if she only did it to end the conversation, or because she couldn’t admit to herself what she felt.” “She says such things all the time, but then she reacts differently.” I am not obliged to accept one description of what happened as the best description, just because my friend or Haidt told me so.

There are also features of the descriptions making up the story that introduce reasons to doubt what we are being told. The mere fact that the story does not end with the more open-ended question “What do you think about that?”, but by asking “Was it OK for them to make love?”, cautions us to think that there may be reason for us to worry about what happened. Why raise the question in any other case? The fact that what we are consequently told is aimed at subduing any such worries augments this impression. We are not told that they enjoyed it and that they grew closer by it for the sake of reaching a deeper understanding of how such an episode may affect the relationship between brother and sister, as well as their relations to family and friends. On the contrary, what we are told serves as a rhetorical device to block all possible objections we are imagined to have in relation to it.

Mark and Julie's decision not to make love again, although they enjoyed it, and to keep their love-making a secret, also suggests that *by their own lights*, there is something that is not OK with their situation. We may have several reasons not to do something although we enjoyed doing it. We may not have the occasion to do it again, we may not be in the mood, etc. Expressly deciding against it, or keeping it a secret, however, is a different matter. If we enjoy doing something, and do not see anything wrong with it, it is intelligible and even expectable to think that we want to do it again, and do not mind telling others about it. Our enjoying it is in that case reason enough for us to do it.

Haidt, in an interview, suggests that the main point of the story is to present a picture of consensual sex between adults where no harm is involved, but where we are nevertheless caused to act with disapproval (Sommers 2005; see Haidt 2013, 45–48). The story is set in France where there are no legal prohibitions against incest between consenting adults (cf. Sommers 2005; Singer 2014.). The decision “not to do it again” (Haidt 2001, 814), is meant to fend off the possible complication of having a brother and sister involved in a longer sexual relationship, including issues such as having to explain it to their families, and possible offspring. Assuring the reader that they will “keep that night as a special secret” (Haidt 2001, 814), targets the emotional harm Julie and Mark could experience by others' judgmental attitudes, considering that everyone would tend to react to what happened as not just not OK, but wrong in fundamental ways they may not be able to explain.

Thus, he assumes that “consensual sex between adults” is the most salient re-description of their situation, with the common, or liberal, understanding in the background that as such it provides no reason for moral concern. We suggest that this redescription can be disputed, and that the descriptions used to tell the story themselves already signal a potential harm in what we are told. (Cf. Stanley et al. 2019, who therefore suggest that moral judgment rather target the likelihood of harm). Even using Haidt's own terms, it is not clear that “consensual sex between adults without harmful consequences” necessarily overrides the description of the case as one of “incest”, with the common understanding of this as wrong. Just as little as “consensual sex between adults that does not involve harm”, in a different case, it must not be seen as overriding the description “cheating on a spouse”.

Summing up, the example underwrites the notion that understanding human morality is simple on two accounts. First, it does so, by suggesting that the story contains all the relevant information to judge it morally. Here, we have shown that as it stands, it does not provide adequate grounds for thinking about its moral meaning, since it is still open to what the morally relevant description is. Second, it does so by disregarding that the framing of the story itself – the question of whether it was OK, as well as the words used to describe Julie and Mark – offers occasion to think of what they did as wrong. It does not only present us with a row of events and actions that we should take a moral stand on, but already involves us in a common understanding of a much more complicated communicative landscape set within the context of our lives with other human beings. Within such a context, we are asked to take a stand on a range of questions about what is involved in being brothers and sisters going on vacation, enjoying something, having secrets, and having sex. (Cf. Diamond's remark that being "able to use the concept 'human being' is to be able to think about human life and what happens in it", 1988, 266, as well as her suggestion that a life with the concept of a "brother" involves the understanding that a brother is not someone about whom one should entertain sexual fantasies, 1995b, 325).

Attending to such conceptual questions about how to describe our actions and relationships alert us to a moral dimension of meaning beyond the kind of "moral judgmentss" that Haidt is interested in explaining. Considering this dimension of meaning, however, is utterly important for reaching a richer understanding of the human context in which the moral concepts he is discussing come to matter to us (cf. Rosaldo 1997, 148–149; Scheler 2017, 222–223). Intentionally neglecting these features of moral life and thought, or disregarding their significance, then, leads to a simplification of what is involved in the description of moral reflection, turning it into a matter of merely registering an intuitive reaction.

## **2. Taking the understanding of the research subjects to the test too easily**

In the three scenarios above, a central feature of our argument was to show that depending on the different contexts we imagine, we are not faced with the same question when asked whether it was OK for Julie and Mark to make

love (cf. Scheler 2017, 222–224). We also stated that a central difficulty is knowing what we are to imagine in the given case. Haidt’s discussion, by contrast, hinges on the suggestion that we can regard the question “Was it OK for them?” as the same question regardless of context. It also presupposes that every reason given by the research subjects for disapproving can be treated as a rationalization of the same kind of affective response, an intuitive “no”.

What allows Haidt to disregard individual differences between the research subjects, is his conviction that they can give no relevant reason for objecting to the story (Haidt 2013, 45–46. Cf. Haidt 2001, 814; Haidt 2006, 21; Sommers 2005. See also Jacobson 2012, 297–298.). The only reason Haidt would accept for thinking that Julie and Mark’s actions are not OK, is if they were connected with causing harm, and his story is intentionally designed to exclude that option. Therefore, if people allude to potential harmful consequences of incestuous action beyond what is mentioned in the story, or disapprove for other reasons, say, religious ones, he thinks we can discard these apparent reasons, and only look to what causes them to disapprove, the underlying process of “moral intuition” (Haidt 2013, 44–47). In a related text, Haidt writes:

Moral arguments are much the same [as spontaneous aesthetic judgments]: Two people feel strongly about an issue, their feelings come first, and their reasons are invented on the fly, to throw at each other. When you refute a person’s argument, does she generally change her mind and agree with you? Of course not, because the argument you defeated was not the *cause* of her position; it was made up after the judgment was already made. (Haidt 2006, 21, emphasis added.)

For Haidt, the negative moral judgment is caused by a feeling of disapproval, which he perceives as a psychological process of moral intuition (2001, 817–818). It is immediate, unreflective, and in important respects, non-verbal. It is, Haidt says, “made automatically (i.e. without intention, effort or awareness of process)” (Haidt 2001, 819).

Haidt’s definition of a “moral judgment” departs from more ordinary as well as philosophical understandings of what is involved in making judgments. In the more ordinary understanding, making judgments, is not simply to be equated with having any kind of reaction. Rather it is a well-

reasoned response; related to the sense in which we can show judgment, and even more good judgment, by making well-considered judgments. Such good judgments, philosophers have been keen to point out, do not only appeal to *explanatory reasons*, my individual, historical reasons for having a certain opinion, but to *justificatory reasons*, bringing into view relevant considerations as to why we should look at a situation in a particular way (cf. Juzaszek 2019, 62).

The philosophical question, therefore, is whether Haidt has good reason for treating the unarticulated processes the research subjects undergo as moral judgments. Is he justified in describing the registered responses of a spontaneous “yes” or “no”, as judgments in the first place? Think of how differently people may respond to Haidt’s story. Whereas some people say something spontaneously and may thus say things they do not necessarily mean, others think carefully before they say anything at all. Why should we say that these people are making judgments, and furthermore, the *same* judgment? Could we not rather say that the first ones are only expressing their emotions, the second trying to please the experimenter or just find a way of ending the experiment (cf. Royzman, Kim & Leeman, 2015, 299), and only the third are attempting to articulate a judgment?

Reflecting on such differences in how articulate and well-considered a response is, is necessary to determine whether it is (a) a judgment, and moreover (b) the same kind of judgment. Two persons, as it were, might answer “no” to Haidt’s question, although their reasons, and whether they do have reasons for it, differ and even conflict. Furthermore, deciding whether a judgment is (c) a moral judgment, raises additional questions. What reasons are we to regard as *moral* reasons, by contrast to, say, legal or genetic considerations? How serious, sincere, or engaged does a judgment need to be to express a genuinely moral stance?

Our point here is not to offer definite criteria for what should count as a judgment, or a moral judgment, in the concrete case. It is rather a reminder that taking what someone says as a (moral) judgment itself involves an evaluation; it constitutes a judgment as to what a (moral) judgment is. Such evaluative judgments can be questioned and challenged. On account of our ordinary understanding of what a judgment, or a moral judgment, is, Haidt’s use of the word can thus be contested.

Haidt is aware that he is departing from ordinary and philosophical usage in his depiction of moral judgments (Haidt 2001, 817). In fact, he endorses such a departure. He says: “To really understand how human morality works, [...] it may be advisable to shift attention away from moral reasoning and toward the study of intuitive and emotional processes.” (Haidt 2001, 825). Rather than engaging in the study of morality as a question of the meaning of normative statements and sensible action in the context of people’s lives, his suggestion is thus to study it as a matter of a uniform psychological process. “Moral sentiments”, as he sees it, are “[...] built into human nature as a set of moral emotions that *make us* want to return favour for favour, insult for insult, tooth for tooth, and eye for eye.” (Haidt 2006, 50, emphasis added). Moral emotions, in turn, “make sense only as products of evolution.” (Haidt 2006, 98).

This notion of “understanding how human morality works” is problematic in at least two respects. First, it presupposes that “human morality” *works* in some definite way and thus serves as a possible object for observation and explanation. Second, it treats understanding “human morality” as reducible to “understanding” an “emotional process”. By contrast, we contend that a fundamental feature of what it means to talk about understanding “human morality” or moral judgments is lost if we do not know *whose* moral judgments we are talking about, or if we are completely disinterested in the lives of the people who actually make them. Here we lean, among others on Max Scheler, who suggests that understanding “whether of an act or of its objective significance, is a basic type of participation” (Scheler 2017, 224). It is through understanding that “one essentially spiritual being can enter into” or realize her involvement with “the life of another one” (2017, 224). Seeking an understanding of morality is thus not to be perceived as an explication of “potentially objective mental realities” (Scheler 2017, 225). Rather it involves us in the illuminative search for experiential significance and depth in an interpersonal relationship, in the search of “knowledge of actual persons and the significance of their actual trains of thought” (Scheler 2017, 225).

Imagine an ethnographic study in which our interest is to understand how people think about incest among adult siblings. How could we go about answering this question? A first step is to ask them what they think, and not just by asking the closed question of whether it is OK, but rather by inquiring



more openly into their thoughts. This involves paying attention to their more spontaneous reactions, expressions of emotion, possible confusions and hesitation, as well as the reasons they give. It is therefore to be expected that we ask follow-up questions, such as, “What do you mean?” or “What makes you say that?” (see e.g. Winch 1964, 316; 1972, 178; Phillips 2001, 9). In the process of such a conversation, we imaginatively try to enter the other person’s life-situation. (Cf. Clifford Geertz 1997, 124, who argues that the historical and anthropological sciences should provide thick, *experience-near*, descriptions of the lives of the people they study. He suggests that whatever use “the imaginative productions of other peoples” which scientists offer “can have for our moral lives, [...] it cannot be to simplify them.” Geertz 1993, 44.)

What we inquire into here is not just the kind of value judgment a person is willing to make when faced with a thought-experiment. We need to consider, as Murdoch says,

something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversations. (Murdoch 1997d, 81)

Our interest is in that sense not only their reaction to a specific example, the act of passing judgment, but more wide-ranging questions concerning the role of sex and sexuality, gender, intimacy, love and family life in their thought.

We also enter into questions about how one person responds to others. Suppose a person rejects incest out of religious conviction. She then finds out that two of her family acquaintances, an actual Julie and Mark, have had sex. Must we assume that she would also condemn them if she met them in the street? Would she refuse to talk with them, or perhaps go as far as taking some kind of action against such “sinful” behavior? Or, should we imagine that she talks with them as usual, but condemns them when they are not around, perhaps thinking that “they will go to hell anyway”? What about a person who answers “no” intuitively when confronted with the story, although this response fundamentally conflicts with his liberal and progressive attitudes? Can we not imagine that such a person would not condemn an actual Julie or Mark if they were to meet? That person might even struggle with

himself and not understand why his original answer played out to be “no”. He might experience a conflict in his own vision of life and find his reaction an unwelcome and not particularly likable feature of himself. (cf. Murdoch on M, 1997b, 313; Rosaldo 1997, 143–144, 148–149.)

Seeking to understand what a person means by “no” here, is seeking to understand how this word enters another person’s world; and thereby also how one relates to that other person’s world and may be challenged by it. If we take “understanding” to include such features, Haidt’s experiment hardly has the potential of offering us an understanding of “human moral life” (Haidt 2001, 829). We know too little about the people in question in order to understand them or their “moral judgments”. The disinterested, impersonal position we are invited to take, is a hindrance to reflecting about morality in meaningful ways. It is, by contrast, a personal, engaged perspective that allows us to speak of understanding in the first place. It enters in two significant senses. First, as long as we are not speaking of the mere transmission of information, a personal background is needed to understand what someone says. Second, entering a personal relationship with the one we want to understand, requires that we take that person seriously. (Cf. Geertz 1997, 124, 128.) It is one thing to ask what reasons a person has for saying or believing incest is unacceptable, quite another to dictate what the acceptable reasons for saying this must be, or that a person has no reason for saying it.

Seeking understanding in the sense we have sketched, is seeking a growing complexity; not the ultimate mechanisms of a causal network. It is here, that the conceptual resources of Haidt’s account reveal their simplicity. By discarding how people themselves think of what they say and do, as well as the significance it has for them to do it, or to refrain from doing it, Haidt removes essential aspects of human morality. The question then becomes whether providing an explanation of a causal network can be equated with understanding another person. If it cannot, we should ask what Haidt gains by reconceiving understanding the human moral sense in line with offering an explanation of “how morality works”.

Haidt is just one among many who have tried to psychologize what is involved in understanding human beings. There has long been a philosophical cleavage between those desiring to explain human behavior by reference to general laws, and those emphasizing the importance of understanding individual experiences in the context of the human being and her social

world, particularly since the advent of “positive philosophy” (see e.g. the logical works of Comte 1839; Mill [1843] 1974; Spencer 1855). At the turn of the 20th century two significant attempts to depsychologize logic were made by mathematician and logician Gottlob Frege (1884) and founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl ([1913] 2014). Their attempts were in part a continuation and in part a departure from the tradition of German idealism. This tradition started with Kant’s transcendental idealism, trying to formulate the conditions of rational thought, the bounds of the world as we know it, and ended with Hegel’s absolute idealism, identifying the world with logic and Reason, the movement of thought through History. These thoughts were carried over into the phenomenological tradition through Husserl, and the analytic tradition through Frege. A central movement seeking to find ways of making philosophical sense of psychological experience was the German neo-Kantian and hermeneutic *Verstehen philosophies*. They emphasized the notion of understanding over explanation within the humanities, and particularly understanding in the form of interpretation being significantly guided by empathy (*Einfühlung*). As a method in interpretative human studies, *Einfühlung* referred not only to non-psychological attempts to grasp another way of thinking (Max Weber), but also to explicitly psychological identifications with another person’s point of view and feelings by emotionally seeking the same mood (*Stimmung*) as the ones to be understood (Theodor Lipps). (See Stueber 2006 for an overview. For a phenomenological critique of *Einfühlung* see Stein 1989 and Scheler 2017.)

Reacting against the tradition of positivism, Eduard Spranger as one representative of this hermeneutic philosophy, remarks, “We understand *only* persons. An impersonal event is not understandable. We can explain it and calculate with it; but we can only *understand* what grows out of the *meaningful* actions among persons” (Spranger [1918] 1980, 31, our translation). The picture Spranger criticizes resembles Haidt’s vision of “human morality”, in which there are no people as spontaneous and reflective individuals, but only people as impersonal minds, which are assumed to function in certain ways (cf. Haidt and Björklund 2008, 186–187). Where Haidt talks about understanding as a matter of explaining an impersonal and general causal network, Spranger links understanding to meaningful action. This does not render impersonal events inexplicable. There is thus no decree against the attempt to encircle events in explanatory terms. The explanations we may garner in this way, however, lack

the feature of entering into another person's world that is a presupposition for speaking about understanding on Spranger's terms (see also Dilthey [1883] 1922, 30–31; Scheler [1923] 2017, 222–224; Vendler 1997, 205). Reducing the question of one's personal involvement in understanding to the impersonal stance seeking explanation risks disregarding people's visions of life. The privileging explanation at the expense of understanding, on this account, is therefore not merely an intellectual failure to distinguish understanding from explanation, and an action from an event. It is a moral failure to take another person seriously.

Two ways of understanding moral judgments and moral reasoning have emerged in our discussion. The first, chosen by Haidt, search for a causal mechanism that explains why someone says something. The second seeks to understand how people's words have meaning in their life. By highlighting the questions that arise when considering people's moral judgments in the light of their different visions of life, we contend that Haidt treats the research subjects as too easy to understand in two fundamental respects.

First, his treatment of their negative answers is too simplistic in taking them as the same, regardless of how they substantiate them. If understanding "human morality" is our aim, we have claimed that the question of whether two negative answers should be understood as the same is something we need to reflect on. It is not something we can presuppose. The only sameness we can take for given, is that people answered "no" on a yes or no question. This is a very shallow similarity if our aim is to understand people and their meaningful actions.

Second, Haidt identifies understanding "human morality" with explaining a uniform process and its cause. In other words, he presupposes a common cause, which is thought to go beyond people's personalities and what they themselves say. On this basis, people's reasons are discarded as irrelevant, and understanding persons, oddly enough, becomes a matter of explaining something impersonal. There remains no question of entering the world of another human being on terms that could come to challenge how we ourselves think and lives our lives. In this way, very little of what may be entailed in understanding human morality, a morality that centrally concerns personal understanding as it develops in relationships between human beings, is left in his picture.

### 3. Conclusion

At the end of the article “Vision and Choice in Morality”, Murdoch writes,

There is perhaps in the end no peace between those who think that morality is complex and various, and those who think it is simple and unitary, or between those who think that other people are usually hard to understand and those who think they are usually easy to understand. All one can do is try to lay one's cards on the table. (Murdoch 1997d, 98).

She here forms a link between thinking about morality as “complex and various”, and perceiving people as “usually hard to understand”, by contrast to thinking of morality as “simple and unitary” and people as “usually easy to understand”. Taking up this linkage, we have shown how morality and moral reflection appear when it is thought of as “complex and various” (Murdoch 1997d, 98) rather than theorized as “simple and unitary” (Murdoch 1997d, 98). We have rejected the idea that one could discern a “certain rationality, universality, consistency” in the “form of morality irrespective of its content” (Murdoch 1997a, 177), and shown how such an understanding comes out in Haidt's research.

There is evidence for such a view of morality in his seeking to explain moral judgment as a uniform process of moral intuitions, and regarding moral reflection as centrally concerned with passing judgments on easily discernible facts. Assuming he can establish that there is nothing objectionable in his story is only one way in which he fails to acknowledge the deeply normative character of his descriptions of moral life. Committing himself to the idea that all good reasons for condemning an action morally need to be concerned with potentially harmful consequences is another. Assuming moral judgments are of the form, it is OK, or not OK, to do this, and that moral reflection centrally involves passing judgments on actions are other substantial moral philosophical commitments that we did not have the space to fully address here.

Both Haidt and Murdoch are interested describing human moral life, particularly our moral psychology. Murdoch's philosophy shows an acute attentiveness to the moral struggles and challenges that providing such descriptions evince. Haidt's work exemplifies an aspect of today's ethics that, according to Nora Hämäläinen, shows “too little appreciation of the *philosophical* import of descriptive work and the *philosophical* hazards involved

in such work” (Hämäläinen 2016, 3, emphasis added). The emphasis is on the philosophical here, since part of the problem in Haidt’s account is the idea that understanding human morality can be psychologized.

Now, if there is indeed “no peace” to be found among those who, as we do, think that there is a need to pay closer attention to the descriptions that moral philosophers, as well as moral psychologists give of morality, and those who in their work hurry past the intricacies of such descriptions, not sensing how hazardous it is, one may ask what this exercise will accomplish. If these differences indeed point to a difference in how one views the task of moral philosophy, and moral psychology, that is not limited to thinking about the disciplines, but also reveals a difference in one’s attitude to life, one’s total vision, it is unlikely that our counterparts will be impressed by what we say.

Although we do not hope for a conversion in the ones who think that “people are easy to understand”, as a result of our discussion, there are two things that can be said in support of it. The first has to do with clarity when it comes to descriptions of morality. The work we have done here can itself be seen as a way of clarifying the issues at hand by giving a more detailed picture of where our problems lie in reflecting on the story of Julie and Mark, rather than presenting an alternative normative argument as to why incest can be both felt and thought of as wrong. The second, connected point, is concerned with the power of argument in moral philosophy. (See Diamond, 1995ac).

Haidt’s outspoken ambition to leave rationalist models of moral reasoning behind for the sake of an intuitive approach was motivated by what he took to be a realization that moral arguments cannot be, or are only seldom, refuted by reasoning. This he took as proof that intuitive responses guide moral judgments. Something similar can be said of deep-seated intellectual commitments, “configurations of [...] thought”, as Murdoch (1997d, 81) would say. These are not the products of reasoning and argumentation, but expressive of the way in which we see the world. Thus, as Haidt may agree, they are difficult to target by reason and argument. Nevertheless, any form of philosophical reflection, including the one in neighboring scientific disciplines, should strive to bring forth such unquestioned assumptions to reach a point where proponents of different visions of morality lay their “cards on the table” (Murdoch 1997d, 98).

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