Dumbfounded by the Facts? Understanding the Moral Psychology of Sexual Relationships

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Abstract

One of the standard examples in contemporary moral psychology originates in the works of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. He treats people's responses to the story of Julie and Mark, two siblings who decide to have casual, consensual, protected sex, as facts of human morality, providing evidence for his social intuitionist approach to moral judgements. We argue that Haidt's description of the facts of the story and the reactions of the respondents as 'morally dumbfounded' presupposes a view about moral reasoning that is more substantial than he acknowledges. Drawing on the philosophical work by Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond, we explore how different descriptions of human morality, sexuality, and family relations engage us in evaluations about distinctive features of human life and language that go deeper than Haidt envisages. Thus, we show the need to attend to the concepts used to describe the facts of human moral psychology and the pictures of morality these concepts reveal about the researcher's own understanding of moral experience. This points to the particular responsibility any researcher into human moral psychology has for ensuring that the descriptions they offer are attuned to the complexities of the lives of those they form theories about and that these do not appear conceptually confounding.

1. Introduction

In the history of the sciences specific scientific disciplines have taken over questions from philosophy and made them their own. Stating this is uncontroversial. It is more controversial to say that they thereby have answered the philosophical question that they turned into science. A present locus for such controversies is the growing field of moral psychology. Using empirical methods, moral psychologists have increasingly taken themselves to explain what morality is. A well-known example of this is social psychologist Jonathan Haidt's discussions of Julie and Mark, two siblings who decide to have casual, consensual, protected and, in Haidt's view, harmless sex on a vacation

in France. People's adverse reactions to hearing the story and being asked 'Was it OK for them to make love?' are taken as evidence for what Haidt calls a social intuitionist approach to moral judgements (Haidt, 2001, p. 814). The inability of the listeners to provide what Haidt deems 'relevant' reasons for thinking that Julie and Mark's actions are morally wrong (Haidt, 2013, p. 46) is taken to reveal a psychological state dubbed 'moral dumbfounding' (Haidt, 2001, pp. 817–818, 829; Haidt, 2013, pp. 29, 42–43) and to attest that moral judgements are not rationally grounded but subject to a 'process' of 'moral intuition'.

Haidt claims that his psychological research provides a mere description of the 'human moral sense' without normative implications (Haidt, 2013, p. 316; Haidt and Pinker, 2016). Yet, many critics have pondered the implicit normative commitments of his study, especially his insistence that the encounter was harmless and the utilitarian streak in focusing on eliminating harmful consequences in judging a wrong (see Jacobson 2008, 2012; and Kronqvist and Elgabsi, 2021, for further consideration of how these accounts relate to the one proposed here). We extend this critique by considering evaluative features inherent in Haidt's telling of the story and we argue that attending to the moral significance of these features of language use requires us to reconsider how moral reasoning is conceptualized in psychological research.

In section 2, we consider the implicit conceptual claims Haidt makes about the kind of statements moral judgements are. We submit that his suggestion that moral reflection paradigmatically takes the form of passing judgements on permissible and desirable actions presents too narrow a vision of what constitutes moral reasoning (cf. Kronqvist and Elgabsi, 2021). Drawing on insights from the philosophical work by Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond, we show that the distinction that Haidt draws between the description of the 'facts of the story' about Julie and Mark and the respondents' evaluative responses to these 'facts' (Haidt, 2001, p. 829; Sommers, 2005) presupposes the possibility of always marking a sharp contrast between facts and values. This does not acknowledge that the different ways of describing what the 'the facts' are in themselves may reveal evaluations of what is of importance in moral and sexual life.

This narrow vision of what constitutes moral judgements and facts leads Haidt to exclude the kind of relationship that holds between brothers and sisters from being a central feature of how to envisage the moral of the story about Julie and Mark. Consequently, so we argue in section 3, his fictitious story involves a set of conceptual and moral conflicts that puts the persons subject to his study in an

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abstract and unfamiliar position regarding family relations and sexuality. This, we contend, leaves them conceptually confounded rather than dumbfounded.

To suggest a way out of this confoundment we contrast, in section 4, Haidt's construction of the story with another fictitious story of incest, one that appears in the screen adaptation of George R. R. Martin's *The Game of Thrones*. This very different way of telling a story of a sexual relationship between brother and sister raises much more complex questions about the moral significance of how we describe *the siblings* than about whether what *they did* was OK. We propose that attending to such complexities in the conceptual framework used to make sense of human life and morality is crucial in order to provide a moral psychology that is more clear-sighted than one that leaves us dumbfounded by the facts.

2. What Kind of Moral Psychology?

Murdoch welcomed an interest in moral psychology in philosophy. Nevertheless, the route taken by Haidt and other moral psychologists in this blossoming field is different from the one she recommended to philosophers in their exploration of human life (see Bagnoli, 2012; Diamond, 1996, 2010, for an overview). Diamond characterizes Murdoch's approach to understanding human psychology and morality as 'Reflective Empiricism'. She describes it as a form of empiricism that does not demand that one's engagement with the empirical sciences be empirical: 'It is an empiricism of reflection on human experience, of humanistic reflection on experience' (Diamond, 2021). 'Experience', then, is here conceived in the broadest sense of capturing one's way of relating to life (what phenomenologists have called 'lived experience'). The 'conceptual moral clarification' that Murdoch suggests for reflecting on experiences in this broad sense involves attention to evaluative features of one's own language use and reflection on our inner moral lives. Some provisos aside, it suggests 'an area of theory, reflection, meditation, contemplation, *between* ourselves and the simple empirical levels of action' for the purpose of 'moral clarification and understanding' (Murdoch, 1997, p. 180).

Haidt's empiricism is of a more recognizable kind. Like Hume, he treats moral concepts as 'non-rational feelings'. 'Experiences' are perceived as inner occurrences causing outward behaviour such as uttering the words 'It's wrong' or offering reasons for why it is wrong. Thus, Haidt's account resembles the emotivist response

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in meta-ethics that Murdoch criticised, although he by contrast does not consider himself to be describing the function of moral language as delineating the 'fundamental logical form of a moral judgment' (Murdoch, 1997, p. 177). Haidt is thus neither interested in reaching conceptual clarity about what we in different situations may speak of as morality, nor is he interested in moral clarity about what aspects of our life and experience should be of importance in making judgements that could be seen as moral. He is interested in the empirically tangible facts of morality, in the knowledge of the human moral sense that the use of scientific methods can provide.

Haidt's interest in the empirical facts of our moral psychology over the concepts used to understand these facts, or a self-understanding about what makes him foreground some features of the situation as facts, emerges in two ways in his telling of the story of Julie and Mark and in the conclusions he draws from the respondents' reactions to it. The first is the suggestion that the story provides 'empirical facts' of an event on which the respondents are asked to take a stand. These are:

> 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. (Haidt, 2001, p. 814)

The second set of facts appear in the respondents' reactions to these 'facts of the story' which are taken as evidence of further empirical 'facts of moral psychology' (Haidt, 2001, p. 829; Haidt, 2013, p. 45; Haidt and Björklund, 2008, p.182). They appear when the respondents are asked to react to the story together with the following question: 'What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love?' (Haidt, 2001, p. 814).

This last question recurs with different variations in Haidt's works (Haidt, 2001, p. 814; Haidt, 2006, pp. 20–21; Haidt, 2013, p. 45). This quotation comes from his much-cited article 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail', which gives a more theoretical view on the implications of his experiments (Haidt, 2001, p. 814). In the unpublished study that the article references the wording is: 'Was it wrong for them to have sex?' (Haidt, Björklund, and Murphy, 2000, p. 15). Although the wording is shifting, the form of the question – 'Is it x to do y?' – remains the same, seemingly leaving one to

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determine what kind of judgement 'action *y* is *x*' is, or on what basis it is made.

In a strikingly similar manner to the meta-ethics and philosophical psychology that Murdoch criticized, Haidt then makes judgements on actions, perceived as an automatic (intuitive) pro- or con-reaction, the central feature of morality. Thus, his empirical psychology fits well with the meta-ethics, the form of logical behaviourism as well as existentialism, that Murdoch argued had privileged philosophical investigations grounded in an action being right and wrong, what she called 'the choice-guiding words' (Murdoch, 1997, p. 79). Making these the salient moral questions, however, appeared to Murdoch as an utter poverty in the description of moral life and thought. She regretted that 'goodness' was no longer conceived as 'a rich and problematic concept' and that deep moral differences were only considered to appear in the choices of actions, and not in differences in the concepts used to describe actions (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 72–73, see also Kronqvist and Elgabsi, 2021).

Haidt's choice of guiding question reveals this narrow scope. Asking whether it was 'OK' or 'wrong' for the siblings to 'make love' is targeted at registering a reaction of approval or disapproval in as neutral a language as possible. 'OK' perhaps succeeds better than 'wrong' in this ambition, although we may argue that 'OK' means the same as '(at least) not wrong'. Considering 'the great *variety* of the concepts that make up a morality' (Murdoch, 1997, pp. 72–73), however, this focus on words that denote a positive or negative reaction becomes more strained. Words like 'acceptable', 'permissible', and even 'good' do signal approval, but they also endorse certain behaviour by linking them to a system of moral norms.

A reason why 'wrong' appears more guiding (cf. Royzman, Kim, and Leeman, 2015, p. 299), and perhaps more moralizing, than 'OK' is that 'right' or 'wrong' imply the existence of rules or principles according to which we judge these actions. The same is true for 'acceptable' if understood as 'acceptable according to a common norm'. 'Permissible', speaks even more to a legal framework – think only of the expression 'permissible by law'. These words significantly direct our attention away from our affective responses. If asked whether Julie and Mark's action was permitted by law, we are asked to consider not what we feel but the legal framework according to which Julie and Mark would be judged. Then again, the deeper notions of 'good' and 'bad' speak not only to an understanding of social norms, but to ideals we ourselves wish to promote, as well as to actions we want to prohibit in the search for a meaningful life.

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Not condemning two siblings who have had sex on those terms is a far cry from thinking of 'incest' as a good to pursue in one's own life.

In suggesting that all significant moral words can be taken as evidence of a general pro- or con-attitude distinctive of our moral psychology, Haidt can then be seen as being 'too impressed by words' (Murdoch, 1997, p. 72) in lending too much weight to our capacity to sort words into general categories. He can, however, also be seen as not taking words seriously enough, in disregarding the different kinds of evaluations that are involved in our moral vocabulary, which ranges beyond the anaemic 'Is it OK?' (cf. Murdoch, 1997, pp. 317, 333). As Murdoch writes, 'Words are tricky things and must be handled with care. We must not be too impressed by them – on the other hand, we must take them seriously enough' (Murdoch, 1997, p. 72).

Another instance of this failure to take words seriously appears in the other choice of words in Haidt's guiding question. Asking whether it was OK for Julie and Mark to 'make love' (2001), and not to 'have sex' as it is stated in the unpublished manuscript (2000), Haidt treats the two descriptions of their activity as interchangeable. Both seem to depict the same actions which we are now asked to evaluate. Here, he follows the philosophers who presuppose the possibility of distinguishing between judgements of fact and judgements of value, where the first is assumed to record objective states and the latter subjective ones. However, as Murdoch writes in one of her central critiques, 'This originally well-intentioned segregation between fact and value', a distinction that clearly works in specific situations, 'ignores an obvious and important aspect of human existence, the way in which almost all our concepts and activities involve evaluation' (Murdoch, 2003, pp. 25–26).[1]

In a more ordinary context than Haidt's, we can imagine a person who tells himself 'We didn't just have sex, we made love' to reassure himself that what had happened was as important to the other person as it was to him. Or, who says 'I was only in need of some intimacy' when he fears that he might have been more invested in what happened than he dares to admit. We can also imagine a person feeling hurt and deceived by the thought 'He was only out to score' or by the other person saying 'There was nothing more to it, I just wanted to f*ck'. In these contexts, what words come to a person

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[1]   The thought of Murdoch can here be seen in relation to the works of Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot who were central to the advancement of virtue theory and philosophical moral psychology (cf. Broackes, 2012, pp. 36–37, fn. 77).

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and strike them as true are not just different words for the same activity. What words they use may be significant in the attempt to grasp what was important in an encounter, and the light it throws on their previous and continuing relationship with another person. Rather than serving as evaluations of predetermined facts, their words attempt to clarify the *facts* of their situation in a way that both presupposes and involves evaluation itself.

The descriptive attempts to pin down the meaning of moral language in the meta-ethical case, or the 'empirical facts' of the 'human moral sense' in the moral psychological case, then, do not pay attention to the 'normative-descriptive character' of our language use (Murdoch, 1997, p. 324). They do not acknowledge how the descriptions they offer serve as descriptions and evaluations at the same time, revealing not only facts about 'morality' and 'sexuality' in a merely descriptive way, but expressing their own understanding of the role sex, love, and intimacy ought to have in human life.

3. The Language of Family Relations

The story about Julie and Mark is carefully crafted to avoid legitimizing the intuitive reaction that something is seriously the matter with a brother and sister deciding to have sex. Against the objection that incestuous sex could cause harm to potential offspring, the respondents are pointed to the fact that Julie and Mark used two forms of birth control and will not repeat their actions (Haidt, 2013, p. 46). To the objection that Julie and Mark may experience emotional harm, it is noted that they both consented to and enjoyed having sex. To the objection that their relationship might be harmed, it is said that they in fact grew closer. To the objection that others might disapprove, they are reminded that keeping it a secret means no one will know. The story is even set in France to avoid the possible objection that their actions could have harmful legal consequences, since French law permits consensual sex between closely related persons.

The set-up of the experiment thus depends on the agreement that these 'facts of the story' determine whether Julie and Mark's actions were OK. A 'fact of the story' that is given no weight in the conclusions drawn from the experiment, however, is the first statement, 'Julie and Mark are brother and sister'. When Haidt asks 'Do you think it is acceptable for two consenting adults, who happen to be siblings, to make love?' (Haidt, 2006, p. 21), the fact that Julie and Mark are *siblings* appears as an accidental feature of the story. What is placed

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centre stage in the presentation of facts is rather that they are consenting adults.

Here a picture of free individuals, again characterized by their choices, makes itself known. The 'taboo violation' of incest is placed by Haidt in analogy to earlier discussions of the wrongness of premarital, homosexual, or polyamorous sex. For if we (or those of us who comply with Haidt's idea of liberals) have come to see that these forms of sexual relations, once considered taboo, are acceptable when consenting adults engage in them, then why should we not also think that sex between brother and sister could be a similar 'taboo violation' that may prove to be acceptable between consenting adults (cf. West, 2012, pp. 317–319)?

What may be felt by the respondents, however, is that the fact that they are siblings is not an accidental feature of the story but the *fundamental* fact to consider when attempting to morally take a stand on what it means for them to have sex (Jacobson, 2012, pp. 301–303). What is so wrong with the story, on this score, is precisely that they are siblings. As one of the respondents immediately answers, 'I think incest is wrong anyway', 'I don't think it's accepted. That's pretty much it' (Haidt, 2013, pp. 46–47). This also throws a different light on the state of 'moral dumbfounding' that the respondents are reported to experience.

The empirical set-up of the experiment suggests that Haidt and his colleagues discover a state of 'moral dumbfounding' in their respondents. Yet, considering the effort made to combat possible objections in the telling of the story, it appears misleading to say that the researchers simply *discover* a fact about the human psyche. The state of 'moral dumbfounding', in which the respondents 'reach deep into their pocket for another reason, and come up empty-handed' (Sommers, 2005; see also Haidt, 2013, pp. 45–47), is rather *produced* by the way the story is told. Haidt even admits that he 'had to write some bizarre stories to give people these flashes of moral intuition that they could not easily explain' (Haidt, 2013, p. 48).

In other words, the psychic state that Haidt claims to be empirically observable, and the facts of our psyche that he contends belong to it, is a logical derivative of how he frames the story and interprets people's responses to it. It is only by positing the 'facts of the story' used to counter the respondents' arguments as unassailable to criticism that the respondents appear as dumbfounded. It is only insofar as we accept this framing of the story that it makes sense to think of people's responses as offering post hoc rationalisations, and not as sufficient reasons, for thinking that incest is morally wrong. Consequently, it is only by methodologically establishing what the

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'facts of the story' are and what the 'relevant' reasons are for approving and disapproving what is happening in the story that certain empirically observable responses appear as 'facts of moral psychology' (Haidt, 2001, p. 829; Haidt, 2013, p. 45; Haidt and Björklund, 2008, p. 182).

Instead of describing the difficulty of knowing what to say in this case as an effect of a psychological state whereby one's cognitive abilities are overruled by affective responses, the respondents could therefore better be described as *conceptually confounded*. Their reactions match the experience of a clash of concepts, as well as an uncertainty about what more general description is to count as the most relevant in thinking about the story: say, 'incest' or 'consensual sex between adults'. This bewilderment is particularly fitting considering the ordinary significance of a brother and sister having sex is not allowed to weigh in on the respondents' understanding of the story.

In a more everyday setting, identifying two people's actions as 'incestuous' is itself reason enough to recognize its problematic character (Jacobson, 2012, p. 301). Just as we only need to acknowledge 'rape' or 'sexual abuse' as the correct description of a set of actions to recognize their wrongness, so saying 'They are brother and sister' or 'It's a case of incest' is meant to bring the conversation to a full stop. Certainly, we may bring in further reasons to substantiate why we think of this as wrong, or why we think one ought to think of what happened under these descriptions. Nevertheless, by bringing their actions under a certain description and acknowledging the pertinence of that description a point is marked at which reason-giving or 'justification comes to an end' (Wittgenstein, 1969, §192).

This move, however, is deliberately blocked in the experimental situation. To be counted as serious, any response must concern the specific 'facts of the story' that Haidt has *dictated* are 'relevant' to judging the story about Julie and Mark (Haidt, 2001, p. 829; Haidt, 2013, pp. 45–47). Thus, appealing to descriptions of what is happening – 'a brother and a sister having sex' – that in an ordinary case would merit agreement about the kind of action it is and its moral character (Diamond, 1988, p. 267) is consciously excluded (Haidt, 2001, p. 814; Haidt, 2013, pp. 44–47).

Yet, there is something misleading in speaking of the wrong the respondents, and we as readers, experience here as a moral wrong. The wrongs that ordinarily inhabit the moral demands we teach our children – say, not taking things from each other but sharing, not harming each other but articulating our disagreements verbally – centrally speak to temptations in our life. In our moral

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education, they usually appear as prohibitions, quite often in relation to our brothers and sisters, such as 'Don't hit your brother' or 'Don't eat all the sweets! Remember to share with your sister'. Thus, our understanding of these prohibitions rests on the recognition that we may *desire* to act contrary to the moral imperatives.

Compared to these cases the incest case appears strange, which adds to the confoundment of the respondents. In the ordinary case 'incest' is perceived as a form of behaviour that does not need to be prohibited with words such as, 'Don't sleep with your sister', nor is it a cause for temptation. As one respondent exclaims, 'It's just not something you are brought up to do' (Haidt, 2013, p. 47). Incest, as anthropologist Robin Fox argues, 'is generally avoided rather than prevented', not because family members may not mate due to biological aversion, but because they often have a too 'close association with each other' (Fox, 1967, pp. 73–74; cf. Lagerspetz *et al.*, 2017 on the Freud-Westermarck controversy on incest aversion or avoidance). Without taking a stand on the origin and prevalence of this lack of desire for intercourse with siblings, it helps to remember that as siblings we usually grow up together in childhood, a time where sexual desire, in the way considered by Haidt, is not a central feature of our life. The point at which sexual desire becomes more prevalent coincides with our moving away from the family (see Fox, 1967, p. 74), seeking another form of closeness and intimacy than the one offered by the family into which we were born.

A better way of approaching the story, preferable to asking whether it is morally wrong, is therefore to say, as Diamond does in a discussion of why we do not eat our dead (cf. Haidt, Björklund, and Murphy, 2000), that speaking of a moral wrong 'is not too weak for that, but in the wrong dimension' (Diamond, 1995, p. 323). That a brother is not someone about whom I should have sexual fantasies is part of the concept of a brother (Diamond, 1995, p. 325). Learning the concept is not just a way of denoting certain genetic relationships but involves learning how to respond to the kind of being a brother is, the kind of care and concern that seeing that this is my brother demands of me, the thinkable and unthinkable ways of showing someone a brotherly love. Saying 'He is your brother' is thus both a *reason* for doing certain things with him and for taking certain attitudes to him, and a *limit* on other kinds of actions and thoughts.

Saying that Julie and Mark are brother and sister, therefore, is not merely a matter of marking a certain fact about them, albeit a fundamental one. Saying that it is part of the concept of a brother and a sister that they do not think of their relationship as sexual rather

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involves a moral stand on the *kind* of relationship it is. Taking a person as one's sibling or living a life with a person as being one's close kin sets a limit to our thought – but not as a matter of what it is possible for us to think of as a psychological fact. Rather, it brings out what we are able to imagine as meaningful possibilities in our life. Therefore, it is also problematic to argue that thinking of the fact that they are siblings is best characterised as a reason for disapproving: in this kind of relationship, certain kinds of possibilities are just out of the question (cf. Jacobson, 2012, p. 301).

4. What Belongs to Our Concepts?

Saying that it belongs to the concepts of being brother and sister that one does not have sexual fantasies about each other is not to say that it is unintelligible for people ever to entertain such thoughts. Neither is it a claim about what is unimaginable in relation to 'brothers' and 'sisters' in another time and place. Despite worries to the opposite, Diamond's remarks about what belongs to our concept of a brother is not a conservative remark about the word's meaning (Diamond, 1988; Eriksen, 2020). Rather, the worry about conservatism presupposes a more substantial view of what it means for something to be a concept than we have introduced so far, for instance that concepts are fundamental, and therefore unchangeable, facts about our life.

The conceptual clarifications we have offered, however, do not introduce concepts as fundamental facts. Rather, we have attended to the language used to describe moral questions to emphasize differences in the evaluative features and ethical implications of the descriptions used to portray the 'facts of a story'. This we have done to delineate how thinking of *our descriptions*, how we speak of something as a fact, as a value, or as something in between, can be considered as distinct from judging whether something *is* a *fact*. So, if someone asked whether the wrongness of incest is similar to the recording of a fact, something that can be true or false, such as 'my brother lives in France', or to the elucidation of the meaning of a concept, such as 'a brother is a male sibling', we would say it is closer to the latter. If someone asked whether not having sex is an accidental feature of a particular relationship between brothers and sisters, such as 'my brother and I have always been close', or whether it is a significant aspect of how we conceive of the kind of relationship between any brother or sister, we would say it belongs to those features of being 'brother' and 'sister' we deem significant for the kind of concept it is. It is 'part of the concept'. This is one

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way of elucidating how thinking about our concepts, thinking through our use of words, involves an area of reflection '*between* ourselves and the simple empirical levels of action' (Murdoch, 1997, p. 180).

Insofar as clarifying the concepts with which we think is part of thinking about how we think, we are also invited to see how our thinking may change. We can think differently. We have pointed to such differences in how Haidt and we think about the 'facts of the story', and we have also offered other ways of taking these facts. Where Haidt suggests that we should describe the respondents' reactions as morally dumbfounded, we have suggested that it is better to think of them as conceptually confounded. Something similar can also happen in the way we think of a brother and sister having sex. What Haidt's experiment shows here is only that we may need to consider further aspects of how the story of their encounter and relationship is told if we are to see how our thinking about 'incest' can change.

By attending to the descriptions of a sexual relationship between sister and brother in another fictitious story, we can consider a case that does not immediately invite a feeling of bewilderment or conceptual confoundment. In George R. R. Martin's *The Game of Thrones* and subsequent screen adaptations, the queen, Cersei, who has an erotic relationship with her brother, Jaime, says they are 'more than' brother and sister. They 'belong' together, they are 'lovers' and in love (Martin, 2013, pp. 485–486); *Game of Thrones*, 2011). This love for her brother is no momentary fluke, no curious one-time desire. They experienced their relationship in this way since they were children. To themselves, they are not *brother and sister* but *lovers*.

Their understanding of themselves, however, is socially awkward, even in a setting in which marriage between brother and sister in some ruling classes is not prohibited. They acknowledge that others do not see what they see, and so they keep their love a secret. No one is allowed to know how they feel for each other, and what they do. The queen's children eventually turn out to be bastards from the affair with her brother, to whom she is of course not married. As this surfaces, both of them are faced with uncomfortable feelings in family life, social pressure, and religious punishment; things that they had tried to avoid by keeping their relationship a secret (*Game of Thrones*, 2015a and 2016).

The authors of this story know very well that the queen and her brother, having this sexual relation, cannot be just brother and sister without simultaneously downplaying the kind of social

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conflicts their characters are facing. Doing that would mean being un-
realistic about the human relationships they attempt to portray. On the
contrary, they must describe their struggle, their awkwardness, their
despair when feeling that they are doing something socially unaccept-
able, and, even for themselves, conceptually confounding. They must
depict how they try to overcome the conflict between being brother
and sister on the one hand, and being lovers on the other. They need
to show what it means to live a life inside this conflict.

This difficulty comes out in them not speaking to each other as
brother and sister but as a couple, something which they can only do
in secret. In keeping their desire for each other a secret, they know
they cannot escape that they are raised by the same parents, that they
have a common brother, and are conceived as brother and sister in
their social circumstances. In public they cannot do what couples or
parents do; the brother can never be a father to his children for 'they
would be stoned in the streets' (*Game of Thrones*, 2015b). Still, he
cares about them in ways they will never know (*Game of Thrones*,
2015a). The confrontation between how they see each other and the
view of someone who is ignorant of their vision culminates in a scene
in which one of their children hears the rumour about 'mother' and
'uncle Jaime' and understands, perhaps, that he is a child to them
and so is disgusted by their presence (*Game of Thrones*, 2012).

Martin's book and the films based on it describe a conflict between
the characters' own understanding and that of those in their social en-
vironment. Yet, the reader and viewer are invited to care for the plight
of these characters, to acknowledge the conflict between an indivi-
dual's or couple's self-understanding and that of their surrounding
community. They thus tell a story of a sexual relationship between
a brother and sister which we do not have to condemn as wrong,
and in relation to which we rather may be moved to think that the
pressure a community's ordinary understanding is exerting is
illicit.[2] It is similar stories of conflict and confusion that have
fuelled changing attitudes and legislation around same-sex love and
relationships, not least through the slogan, also accepted by many lib-
erals, that 'love is love'. Such ways of framing stories about sex and
love have changed, or are continuously changing, our perception of
what the relevant ways are of thinking about an individual

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[2]   This does not yet commit us to thinking that a particular couple, like
Cersei and Jaime, necessarily love well. The liberal is right in insisting that a
society should permit its members to also enter bad relationships. It is wrong
in suggesting that consent and desire are enough to judge that a relationship
is good (cf. Kronqvist, 2020).

relationship as well as what it means to be a man or a woman. (Erotic attraction, affection, and attention are no longer seen as a prerogative of the 'love between man and woman'.)

Now, Haidt's interest is not to change our understanding of incest as wrong. Neither is ours, nor necessarily Martin's. As long as there is no upsurge in real-life Julies and Marks, and the anthropological evidence continues to show that 'incest is generally avoided rather than prevented' (Fox, 1967, pp. 73–74), we have no reason to question our historically and culturally situated, and perhaps even psychologically grounded, understanding of sisters and brothers as beings with whom we are not to have sex. In fact, considering the lengths to which Haidt goes in convincing us of a case that is not harmful, we may have good reason to endorse our ordinary understanding of it as something odd and out of the question.

The problem we have pinpointed in Haidt's story is rather that it fails to be a convincing story about sexual morality, and thereby also about morality. The story is designed to show how we cannot avoid thinking of incest as wrong despite our liberal tendencies to think otherwise. In contrast to the example from *Game of Thrones*, it does not present us with a description of their relationship that would allow us to think about it beyond our social conventions. It does not invite us to see just how their sexual encounter leads them to 'feel even closer to each other' (Haidt, 2001, p. 814) by challenging and changing the concepts they use to understand themselves, the descriptions they find fitting to their relationship. In these respects, his account of the empirical facts of our moral psychology is more conservative than ours. It conserves a picture of morality as bounded by the facts and does not consider the changes we may undergo in thinking about what makes morality an indispensable feature of our life and language.

Haidt's thinking about what may be learnt morally by considering his story thus stems and suffers from too general a picture of what conceptual and imaginative resources are needed to untangle the issues involved in a brother and sister deciding to have sex on the spur of a moment, and how we ourselves are morally implicated in how we think of such a story. What do we, for instance, take as a 'fact of the story', and what as a 'fact about our moral psychology'? What descriptions are in turn revelatory of the historically situated and conceptually seeped lives that we live? What is the contribution of the kind of beings we are and become to the family relations we are born into and the relationships we form in other ways? Furthermore, Haidt relies on a picture of what sex is and what it means to speak of it as 'OK', which renders his story too abstract. It does not register the various moral words we call up to think of

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our relations to each other, as well as our historically and culturally shifting concepts of 'having sex' and 'making love'. Deciding to 'make love' with one's brother or sister is described in terms suitable to the decision to 'play a game of Scrabble'.

5. Conclusion

Haidt takes his study to be purely descriptive, speaking of his results as 'empirical facts about moral psychology'. Yet, we have shown that his experiment and his interpretation of it draw on a specific understanding of what moral reasoning consists in, one that is clearly normative in character. The notion that a rational way of relating to 'the facts of the story' can only concern the harmful consequences of actions perceived as events in the world imposes, on us and on those facts, an understanding of what moral reflection is and should be.

Our intention was not to take a normative stance on the harmfulness of incest. Instead, we brought out the evaluative assumptions about what moral reflection is, which emerges in Haidt's suggestion that Julie and Mark's sexual encounter is harmless. Here the work of Murdoch was conducive to our aims. The problems Murdoch saw in moral philosophy were not connected with providing yet another rational framework for establishing normative principles for moral action. The problems she saw were rather 'problems in the philosophical description of morality' (Cook, 1999, pp. 130–138). The aim of our discussion has been to point to such problems in Haidt's psychological description of 'human moral life' (Haidt, 2001, p. 829). We have shown how his implicit assumptions about moral judgement make him insensitive to, and clash with, distinctions that are at work in our ordinary dealings and understandings of sexual and familial relationships.

Recognizing that there may be a clash between an empirical psychologist's descriptions and the moral lives of the people they try to describe, however, does not commit us to thinking that whenever theoretical and ordinary understanding clash, ordinary understanding should necessarily rule. Nevertheless, any researcher in the human sciences who wants to promote a description that disregards certain distinctions that are of moral significance to us in our ordinary life is obliged to show why this is indeed a better description than one that takes them into account.[3]

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[3]   Kronqvist's interest in this topic was initially stirred in a conversation with Martin Gustafsson, Olli Lagerspetz, and Hugo Strandberg together with students from a local high school. Some of the initial arguments

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