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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Making sense of the self: an integrative framework for moral agency

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Abstract

The self is conceptualized in a multitude of ways in different scholarly fields; at the same time moral agency appears to presuppose a unitary conception of the self. This paper explores this tension by introducing 'moral senses' which inform the normative evaluations of a person. The moral senses are featured as innate dispositions, but they inevitably recruit discursive categorizations in order to function. These senses forward both an 'individual self', by experiencing a unitary body, mind and character, and a 'social self', that is similarly experienced as a body, a mind, and a character. This social self is enabled by the capacity to internalize other people's feelings and intentions and the need to have otherworldly explanations for observable reality. This integrative framework of moral senses provides an understanding that helps to address the challenge of moral heterogeneity and plurality.

KEYWORDS

moral agency, individual self, social self, moral intuitions, boundary work

1 | INTRODUCTION

Not many people will doubt the presence of a self that defines the core of their being, this self forwards the idea of a unified and persistent personhood and it provides the moral orientations that guide one along in action. However,

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if we look at scholarly conceptualizations of the self, the coherence and sheer validity of the notion seems to evaporate.

A first source of fragmentation is the antagonism between the 'humanist' and the 'poststructuralist' model of the self (Davies, 1991). In this, the 'humanist' model gives an individual person a unified identity that is able to make coherent choices, while the 'poststructuralist' model presents the self as a set of 'subjectivities' that *position* the person (also see Davies & Harré, 1990); meaning that the self is defined as the outcome of discursive processes that take place in a heterogeneous set of collectives.

The humanist model is very much dominant in ethics (Abend, 2019), which has to do with the way in which this model allows for individuals to take moral positions and to be held responsible for their decisions, which are assumptions that have become embodied in our main social and political institutions (cf. Benhabib, 1988). This does not at all mean that the poststructuralist model is devoid of moral connotations, as this approach raises many questions about the justice of reproduced discursive categorizations. These questions have been taken on in feminist critiques (Fraser, 2000; Young, 1986), but how they add up to moral orientations that guide individuals in their choices seems to be less clear.

Next to the humanist and poststructuralist approaches to the self, we may also observe conceptions forwarded by behavioral sciences such as psychology and biology. In these functionalist approaches, the self is the outcome of the physical workings of an evolutionary developed brain. To an increasing extent, such accounts also provide insights about moral behavior, for instance by using findings from evolutionary biology (Dennett, 1995, 2017b; Kitcher, 2011), psychology (Alfano, 2016; Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002; Haidt, 2001), neurology (Haidt & Graham, 2007), and primatology (Brosnan & de Waal, 2014; De Waal, 2006).

What then is left of the capacity for moral agency if the self that motivates our moral judgment is characterized by fragmentation? How can these different approaches be combined into a singular framework of moral agency, given their contrastive ontological outlooks? Especially the functionalist approaches have been criticized for their reductionist tendencies (Berker, 2009; Blasi, 1999; De Boer, 2011; Fine, 2006; Van Veelen, 2009), and indeed these approaches come with behavioristic suggestions that do not allow room for active reflection and conscious judgment and as such challenge the very idea of moral agency. Nevertheless, insights from behavioral studies can give rise to a more comprehensive understanding of moral agency, as these allow the role of emotions and innate motivations to be taken into consideration. It will be argued here that, at least to a certain extent, this inclusion of behavioral elements allows to bridge the humanist and poststructuralist conceptions of the self.

Crossing the disciplinary boundaries that underlie the different conceptualizations of the self will give rise to contested claims. Acknowledging the presence of this challenge, this paper will develop an integrative framework for moral agency that incorporates these different approaches to the self. The point of departure for that framework is that humans have 'moral senses' that allow normative evaluations.[†] Such moral senses can be seen as capacities which every person naturally possesses, while their actual working recruits socially transferred linguistic categorizations. I have labelled these senses 'moral', as they relate to matters of judgment about what is good and what is wrong, guiding human agents through their lives.

These moral senses operate very much like physical senses, in the sense that they can be seen as functions of the brain that allow a person to interact with the external world. Perception is then not seen as a mere passive activity of representing external phenomena in the brain, but as the active process of imposing an evaluative order upon external reality so as to make sense of it (Zimbardo, 1992). The brain organizes the set of sensory perceptions into a representation of ourselves and the outside world. Making sense of these phenomena requires the applications of categories of these phenomena (Rosch, 1999). The outcome of the analysis is that humans are innate judgmental animals, as every impression needs to be classified first.

It needs to be emphasized that the categories maintained by the moral senses have, in their very essence, a *discursive* nature – implying the poststructuralist model of the self. To underline that claim, I will use the notion of 'boundary work' derived from science and technology studies (see Gieryn, 1983) to describe the way in which *boundaries* are created and maintained with regards to the discursive understanding of actions, events, and other

phenomena. Imposing such discursive boundaries helps to unify a multitude of impressions, so that a coherent and singular order is created which gives a person the opportunity to engage in purposeful action. With that, our activities can be coordinated, responsibilities can be established, and past decisions can be turned into objects of reflection.

In this, the following three moral senses are seen as establishing an 'individual self': the *unitary body* that is based on the capacity to make a mental map of the body; the *unitary mind* that creates the image of a singular agent, allowing us to act intentionally, and the *unitary character* that refers to the ongoing maintenance of a coherent biography. These three senses can also be seen at the level of a social entity, which is imagined to also have a body, a mind and a character. As such, a 'social self' emerges that figures as a moral point of orientation for individual members of a community. The existence of this social self is firstly secured by the presence of the capacity to *internalize other people's feelings and intentions* and secondly by the shared belief in 'otherworldly' explanations of worldly phenomena. The need for such explanations appears to follow from the confrontation between finite life and the *experience of infinity* – as it will be dubbed here. With this description of moral agency, we can revisit today's ethical challenge, which is how to deal with the plurality and heterogeneity of discursive categorizations while our moral senses appear to pursue unity and coherence.

2 | SENSES OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF

The individual self can be said to be composed out of body, mind, and character which are organized by our moral as coherent accounts. There may be many other ways to disentangle the self, but in terms of deciding on desirable courses of action this allows a productive description. The individual self produces the self that is central in ethical humanist approaches to moral agency.

2.1 | The unity of the body

The idea presented in this paper that moral senses motivate moral choices has been triggered by the notion of *proprioception*; the capacity of the brain to make sense of the body as a unified whole. Or as Ramachandran, (1998, p. 1851) states: "Your own body is a phantom, one that your brain has temporarily constructed purely for convenience". The brain perceives the body by creating a mental map of it. This capacity to map the body has been frequently seen as a sixth sense (e.g. Sacks, 1998), which allows us to experience the limbs as part of the body as a whole. As such, the body moves as a coherent entity permitting coordinated courses of action.

Proprioception is usually experienced unconsciously, which might explain why it is hardly taken into account in conventional descriptions of our physical senses. The ability to perceive the body as a unified whole allows the individual to experience herself as set apart from the rest of the world. Without it, there would be no demarcation between external and internal events and processes. Having a body and experiencing the ownership over that body creates the possibility of reacting as an organism in concerted fashion. The body becomes the protagonist that is able to act as a singular unit. As the senses gather different types of information, the brain organizes these different segments into a singular stream of perceptions so to allow the self to engage in directed actions.

Though proprioception is usually featured as a neurological function, any self-understanding of the body as unitary entity invokes discursive categorizations, which come with strong moral connotations, as – following the classic account of Mary Douglas (1966) – the boundary that is drawn between body and the external world appears to be strongly based on what is clean and what is dirty. The differentiation between the inner body and the outer world can be understood as 'stuff' that crosses the boundary of body and world are seen as dirty. Blood, sweat, semen, snot, and pus are widely considered to be taboo because of their dirtiness (Pesch, 2015b). Such forms of dirt direct our attention to the fact that the boundary between ourselves and the world is a permeable one. Controlling the

boundary between body and world however does not seem to be an innate quality: children have to learn how their body is a distinct entity. It pertains to norms and taboos that are substantiated differently over cultures (Moore, 1985). This suggests that the boundaries that constitute the mental map of a body are the object of normative evaluation themselves (Kelly & Morar, 2014).

It needs to be added that sensing the body does not have to stop at the boundaries of the skin. We dress ourselves up with clothes and technologies and we have no problems to experience glasses, hats, cutlery, and cars as augmentations to our body. The metaphor of the cyborg has been used to describe the techno-human hybrids that are being created: exoskeletons, virtual reality, and so on, are technologies that pervade the bodily boundaries, as cybernetic systems provide methods of control that make these technologies part of the mental map of the body (Clark, 2001). As such, these developments reveal the adaptiveness of the capacity to understand the body as a unitary whole, and they highlight the contingency of the discursive boundaries that we experience to be real at a certain moment in time.

In sum, proprioception figures as the template for how I will construct the other senses, spelling out an anatomy in which the senses create unity out of a plurality of external stimuli that allows for concerted action. This is done by constructing temporal episodes that are given meaning in terms of a flow from one normative state to another. This meaning is translated into a *preferable course of action*, which is presented to the person in the form of moral emotions (Brady, 2008; Railton, 2014). With that, the moral senses construct a *protagonist*, a unitary agent, that is capable to respond to changes in its environment.

2.2 | The unity of mind

Proprioception forwards the body as a protagonist, but also the *mind* is experienced as a unitary entity. According to Daniel Dennett (2017a), different streams of information are brought together into a singular 'presentation' in the Cartesian theater of the mind. It is here that *intentionality* resides; the unitary mind gives us the impression that our choices are deliberate, and that our actions are willful. Obviously, most of the things we do are done without given them any attention. We can breathe, eat, and walk without even noticing it. We can even engage ourselves in extremely complicated activities like driving a car or playing a piano without giving them a second thought. But also decisions that we believe to have taken deliberately are in many cases the result of unconscious mental processes.

This does not mean that humans do not have a free will: it just means that the free will does not have the shape that it is given by the workings of the brain. The account of Dennett presents consciousness as an epiphenomenon: an assemblage of various information processing streams that appear to be one singular stream. Intentionality is best seen as a narrative constructed by the brain that turns our beings into protagonists of a story. Moreover, we *are* intentional in some very elementary ways. Many of our performances are indeed consciously orchestrated, based on active reflections and planning skills.

In fact, the creation of the unitary mind is based on boundary work, just like the creation of the body. The experience of the mind is based on the construction of a boundary between those processes that are willful and those processes that are not. As with the boundaries of the body, this boundary is far from unequivocal. The brain might indeed fool itself and we may be taken over by processes that lie far beyond the reach of intentionality, sometimes in the shape of sincere pathologies such as schizophrenia, but – fortunately so – usually in case of benign addictions and inconsequential habits.

The moral sense of having a unitary mind allows for choices that are considered intentional. As such, this capacity functions as one of most constitutive elements for ethical and social behavior. The humanist model of the self relies on the way it is embedded in societal and political institutions, which can be said to present the dominant normative schemata by which we evaluate actions of both ourselves and of others. In this, human agents are very much guided by the assessment of others, our main institutions – with the domain of law as the archetypal case – are founded upon the idea that one has to be able to respond to questions about reasons for our choices (Habermas,

1985; Pesch, 2014). This requires the compliance with social norms and the appraisal of other individuals (cf. Greenwood, 2011). Being asked to account for your actions implies that one has to be able to give reasons for those actions. Pre-linguistic drives have to be articulated in terms of shared discursive categorizations in order to be recognized as motivations that can be evaluated on their validity. Institutions draw boundaries between the motivations that are considered to be reasonable and those which are not, for instance because of neurological, social conditions, or lack of foreseeability.

The reciprocal relation between institutions and moral judgment assumes the possibility of *changing* certain moral evaluations, or of 'moral learning', so to say. To allow for the possibility of change, we need to acknowledge that the role of intentionality not only pertains to control regarding instantaneous decisions, but that intentionality also provides the ability to actively *reflect* on the desirability of certain decisions, and to adjust our normative schemata so that future choices will become more preferable. Bringing the decisions to the frontstage of consciousness allows them to be evaluated from different viewpoints in order to come to an overall judgment. In that sense, choices are the result of conscious activities, because they build on an existing history of normative evaluations. This historical nature of moral assessment may shine some light upon the conundrum that moral intuitions seem to be driven by affects (see Damasio, 2003; Roeser, 2006), while intentional behavior is regulated elsewhere in the brain. It can be suggested that over time such acquired schemata will be delegated to subconscious decision-making routines (Damasio, 1994); we will *learn* to make the choices that are seen as morally right. In this it is necessary to add that just like it takes conscious attention to learn the skill of driving a car before it becomes an automatized activity, improving one's normative schemata also necessitates conscious attention.

2.3 | The unity of character

The mind creates a narrative of the now. Impressions are organized so to allow the illusion of control. Human agents also maintain unity by conceiving their lives as entities that evolve over the span of a lifetime. In this, we regard our behavior as stable – constituting a coherent moral character. On the longer run, we think that we learn to become who we are, that our character and our actions come together. It can be said that we create a 'narrative self' that maps the mind over a longer period of time, so that a biographical unity develops that guides our direct actions, but that also allows us to project our plans for the future (Gallagher, 2000). This biographical self includes the continuity of the moral standards that we adhere to (Strohmingner & Nichols, 2014).

Losing one's capacity for a biographical self, for instance because of Alzheimer's disease, is often seen as one of the hardest fates that one may experience. It indeed affects the very core of ourselves, without being able to plot our actions as part of a meaningful whole that unfolds as a story over time, we will lose our personhood.

We are constantly busy with the question about who the I is that I am. A moral identity emerges from the long-term self-organization that informs concrete moral judgments (Kaplan, 2017). Life unfolds itself as a story of which the 'I' is the protagonist. It is our task as agents to make ourselves relate to this story as we go along. This is done by assessing how choices and their consequences are extensions of this story. This is no one-way traffic, our character informs our choices just as or our character may be defined by critical choices which may reveal that you are not the one that you thought you were. Certain historical contexts may provide an individual with a moral dilemma and turn an honest person into a traitor or a nobody into a hero. As said, a character is a story that unfolds itself, and it may appear that this story has unexpected plot turns. Most commonly, however, is that we change our self-image at such a slow rate – if we change at all – that we do not even notice the change.

A character gives coherence to a discrete sequence of choices, providing the impression that life is a meaningful whole. At the same time, this narrative biography is a fiction of the brain, and there is a continuous process of adjustment to adapt memories to fit the changes of a narrative identity (Vollmer, 2005). With that, the brain is constantly executing boundary work, each action and each normative assessment has to be weighed and delegated to either side of the boundary between the I that I am, and the I that I am not.

It appears to be typical of humans that we do not only assess our own actions, or those actions that directly have an impact on us, but that we make ourselves relate to cases which are fully inconsequential to our own lives. This capacity also appears to play a role in the ongoing constitution of character, confronted with the stories and choices of others, we ask ourselves what we would have done. The dilemmas of others become our own, and we use these to make more sense of ourselves as moral characters. Just like we need to be able to adapt the mental map of the body, we also have to be prepared to change our self-image.

3 | THE SENSES OF THE SOCIAL SELF

In the descriptions of the moral senses of the individual self, it has been shown how these senses invoke discursive categorizations that have a collective character: in other words, the 'I' always summons the 'we'. But there are other ways in which individuals experience collectivity: we not only sense ourselves as individuals, but we also perceive ourselves to be members of a group. As Sandelands, (1994, p. 307) writes: we have "a feeling of society as distinct from a feeling *in* society and from a feeling of self". Sandelands stresses the need to distinguish the feelings of self and of society, though these are often conflated. Here, I will build on this idea of a sense of society by introducing a set of moral senses that allow a social self to be maintained.

3.1 | Sensing the group as a collective self

The community of which we consider ourselves to be part of bestows us with both feelings and emotions. We may share our pain and our joy, but we may also share our hate and our pride. Our moral senses regarding our body, mind, and identity can be transposed to the level of a social group; though a group has no singular brain, it is striking how similar the regulatory principles are regarding individuals and groups.

Feeling what the group feels has strong moral repercussions. As normative schemata become internalized they also become governed by our emotional household that triggers moral sentiments. We identify ourselves emotionally with the group as a whole; social norms are internalized and express themselves to the individual in the form of emotions.

The identification of an individual with a larger body of individuals occurs through the construction of a mental map of the group these individuals are members of, just like the brain constructs a mental map of the body. A group that can be said to dispose over a 'collective consciousness' (cf. Durkheim, 1973) that sustains the idea of a common destiny. A 'we'-intentionality (cf. Searle, 1995) emerges in case of a goal that is related to a shared narrative that establishes the *biography of the group*. Such a common narrative allows individuals to engage in collective patterns of action, it also legitimizes the given social order that exists out of norms and meaning and social norms. A social order can be seen as a belief system that includes myths and histories that give the group a destiny to which its members are subservient.

The process of constructing a collective identity also has a reciprocal relation with the process of drawing up boundaries between those that belong to 'us' and those that belong to 'them'. History is painted as a sequence of wars, conflicts between collectives that are largely defined by their involvement in these conflicts themselves (Marcus, 2010). The creation of boundaries is facilitated by defining other groups as 'not-us', the narrative that we share as a collective is often based and reinforced upon the construction of enemy groups that figure as an existential threat to our own group's identity. Again, history reveals how we protect the boundary between us and them just like we protect the boundaries of our body, keeping others out, and seeing infiltrators as filth (Bauman, 2013; Kelly & Morar, 2014). Analogous to the body, such boundaries allow for the perception of self-control – again a discourse we recognize in contemporary politics –, but this perception comes with some very strong moral challenges, especially as a tribal mindset has to make sense of the complex world that we nowadays live in.

There is even less reason to assume any unity here than in the case the individual self. In fact, communities are above all characterized by the presence of *conflict*; after all one of the defining features of a community is that it conveys mechanism for conflict resolution (Gintis et al., 2015; Wong, 1992). More importantly, in the contemporary world, individuals make part of a heterogeneous network of coalitions, ranging from families to states, from clubs to companies, from 'intentional communities' (Shenker, 2011) which people have deliberately chosen to form to 'imagined communities', such as national states (Anderson, 1983). This means that our current social environment is characterized by complexity and heterogeneity (Davies, 1991), and we constantly move from one group to another (cf. Passini, 2010). There is no singular social order to which we respond, while at the same time, the belief in a unitary 'I', and, in extension, a unitary 'we' is maintained.

In the same vein, it is tempting to identify a community with a singular set of discursive categories that forwards both the individual and the collective with a coherent and unified identity. Such a vantage point motivates romantic ideals, but it does not align with the heterogeneity of discursive categorizations that pertain to individuals and communities (Davies & Harré, 1990). The positioning of individuals takes place against the background of this heterogeneity, compelling the person to mediate between the different categorizations that are at play. A process that takes place unconsciously as personhood presupposes a self that is unitary and continuous.

3.2 | The symmetry of experience

The creation of a social self depends on the moral capacity to experience the *feelings of others* as well as to recognize the *intentions of others*. Being able to recognize emotional states and intended actions is an essential prerequisite for cooperation: knowing what others will do allows you to adapt your own courses of action to theirs, just like other individuals will adapt their courses of action based on their reading of your mental state. Recognizing intentionality and emotional states allows an individual to be part of a greater collective of individuals.

Empathy means that we are capable of *feeling* what others feel. This appears to be literally so, mirror neurons allow not only the recognition of the feelings of others, they also allow for the internalization of these feelings (Gallese & Goldman, 1998). If we see someone in pain, the brain makes us experience this pain – maybe not to same degree, but still the brain receives the same stimuli as when your own body is in pain. Feeling the feelings of others establishes symmetry in bodily experiences.

The scope of this symmetry of perceptions is much wider than just empathy. It extends to the identification of the wants and needs of others, as well as their intentions (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005). Connected to this capacity to read intentions is the innate drive to recognize and react to other people that need help. Experiments have shown that children of six months will help out people believed to be in need. Apparently toddlers are mind-readers before they are considered to be self-conscious (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). The necessary skill that is required for helping out is highly developed: a child has to recognize the situation, she has to feel involved, she has to recognize the intention, and she has to care for the protagonist of this intention, before she can engage in action. Also other experiments with small children show that the ability to plot a storyline in moral terms is present at a very young age. People seem to be able to differentiate between right and wrong at the age of just a few months (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007), which hints at the innate qualities that we have, and that will be shaped further as we internalize linguistic repertoires.

Though humans may considered to be good 'mind-readers', they do get it wrong at times. Not only may intentions be misread, we also seek to explain actions to be willfully undertaken by agents even if they are not. I am not only alluding to animistic or supernatural beliefs, but we may also experience pain when a robot or a toy is exposed to violence (Coeckelbergh, 2011).

Empathy also does not mean that we are naturally inclined to be nice to each other. Knowing what hurts comes in handy when you want to hurt someone; knowing how people are inclined to respond may invite strategic and sometimes even abusive behavior. This is because people seek power, or in rare cases have psychopathic tendencies.

But most of all, we reserve empathy for those that we consider to belong to our social group, those that we feel that we *care* for (cf. Sabini & Silver, 1985). The restriction of sympathy and the quest for meaning are intrinsically tied to the identification of individuals with a wider social collective. Our mirror neurons discriminate on the basis of who is one of us and who is not. In other words, empathy does not imply sympathy – the latter being a restrictively applied quality (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Not only does our capacity to recognize the feelings and needs of others allow the creation of a social self, it also helps to sustain the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

3.3 | The experience of infinity

Probably unlike other primates, we ‘experience infinity’, as it has been dubbed by Descartes. What is actually perceived as infinity is far from clear, because when we force ourselves to express this perception, we have to rely on our finite linguistic repertoire. Also its evolutionary role is ambiguous, some would say that it is not an evolutionary survival strategy at all, others have pointed at the efficacy of believing in a supernatural reality so to create a strong moral force that keeps the community intact (Purzycki et al., 2016).

It is not the intention here to get into the metaphysics of the ‘really real’. Instead, I want to point at the apparent human need to look behind observable reality to find ultimate explanations, that grant legitimacy to discursive categorizations that are maintained within a culture. The transcendental order that is developed serves the goal to attribute meanings to the affairs of the observable world. Also, it allows us to embed the regularities we infer from a series of observations into a wider explanatory structure. In other words, we can give meanings and induce patterns to the empirical phenomena that pertain to us, by connecting it to an ‘otherworldly’ order. In this, otherworldliness does not have to relate to supernatural reality *per se*, it may, for instance, also relate to a world that lies in a utopian future. Science-based explanations, which are ‘innerworldly’ by definition, do not seem to be emotionally convincing. Solomon (1993) claims that the philosophical question of ‘meaning’ has no answer: the deadness of the physical universe appear to conflict with our inner drive for finding meanings and answers.

Also here, one may observe an apparent quest for unity that overrides the contingency, the inadequacies, and the conflicts that characterize our conventional social orders. This unity may be attained by following rules and by erecting boundaries as rigorously as possible (cf. Bauman, 2013). For instance in the case of nationalism, in which the belief in a ‘pure nation’ serves as a future vision that recruits certain kinds of action. The idea that unity is attainable may recruit zealots of all sorts to force moral rules upon others, it may also drive individuals for spiritual quests that drive them away from immediate social bonds.

With respect of the threats posed by the idea of unity, it is interesting to refer to the ethical theory of Levinas who also uses the experience of infinity as a starting point. According to the phenomenological view of Levinas (1996), our linguistic categorizations force an order upon reality, while reality itself is a seamless whole, which make any ontological categorization a strained one. Levinas states that we have a pre-linguistic (or pre-ontological) awareness of the arbitrariness and deficiency of these categorizations, which is enticed by the confrontation with other selves who have this same awareness. As opaque as the Levinasian point of view may sometimes appear, its message is that no ultimate ethical theory can be derived from existing discursive classifications, as these have contingent origins. As such, we should always doubt existing moral rules and categories, making the pursuit of moral progress an ambiguous and open-ended challenge.

4 | NURTURING THE SKILL OF MORAL AGENCY

The moral senses that have been described here allow a person to maintain the idea of a self vis-à-vis a heterogeneity of discursive categorizations. With that, individuals are able to engage in in action, building on the socially

acquired intuitions about which courses of action are right or wrong. In many ways, the moral senses build on each other and, to an important extent, moral behavior can be seen as the attunement of the 'I' and the 'We'.

It would be a mistake to assume a flawless fabric of senses. There are salient tensions between the moral senses, and also within them. For instance, one may be faced with a dilemma between the quest for identity and the loyalty of a group, we may have to respond to contrastive demands of loyalty to different groups, or the rules of our belief system may collide with inner drives – the experience of mixed emotions is all too common. To cope with such mixed emotions, moral agency can be said to require 'skill'; we have to train our judgment on which courses of action are the right ones while making sense of the multitude of signals that we receive. Here, it also needs to be added that the skill of moral agency may be hampered by individual factors: one may have difficulties in 'sensing' the right signals, just like some people see or hear less good than others.

The complexity of our contemporary social environments poses a strong demand on such skills. In modern society, individuals are confronted with a multitude of social orders, revealing that there are different normative schemata, boundaries and moral choices that can be applied (cf. Liu & Macdonald, 2016). This plurality strongly opposes the nature of our moral senses that pursue unity and coherence. This suggests that it is necessary to develop the skill that allow individuals to counter innate motivations to thwart heterogeneity and ambiguity – as is supported by Levinas's account of infinity. To do so, we may look at institutions, which, at least to a significant extent, can be seen as discursive categories made formal, allowing for a stable moral order. This suggests that we should create the right institutions that can function as contexts that provide moral guidance to individuals, enabling the required virtues and skills to be nurtured (Benhabib, 1988; Pesch, 2015a).

As has been stated in this paper, modern institutions have been very successful in promoting the humanist model of the self: giving individuals the categorizations needed to develop their self-image as an intentional agent. However, increasingly the moral issue of justice is taken on as a key challenge for institutions (Pesch, Correljé, Cuppen, & Taebi, 2017; Rawls, 2009; Walzer, 1983). This challenge pertains to the way in which dominant institutions position individuals without giving them the opportunity to renegotiate these positions. This may create situations in which the vulnerabilities of certain groups of people cannot be addressed, these vulnerabilities may even be reinforced. As globalization presents new types of vulnerabilities, the demands for justice become even more pressing.

The humanist model may not provide the right conceptual tools to do so, as it predominantly focuses on individual moral agency, disregarding the social aspects of moral life. The framework that has been developed here explains how we make sense of ourselves as moral agents, both from an individual and from a social point of departure, and as such it may help to create the institutions that suit to reproduce our humanist selves, but also our social selves in a global society that is characterized by plurality.

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ENDNOTE

[†]This account may make one think of the so-called Moral Sense Theory that has been developed in moral philosophy as a meta-ethical approach that deals with 'an epistemology of moral judgments' (Broad, 1944, p. 131). This theory uses the senses mostly as a metaphor to describe the way in which 'moral truths' are discovered. As the true or false-status of moral judgment is not relevant in the account of moral senses I present here, it can be said to differ substantively from Moral Sense Theory.

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