

Response to Gil Harman's "Did Marc Hauser's *Moral Minds* Plagiarize John Mikhail's Earlier Work?"

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Gil Harman's unpublished essay stipulates that my citations to John Mikhail's thesis work are insufficient and that *Moral Minds* is nothing without Mikhail's ideas. Harman also believes that the publication of my book in 2006 undercut Mikhail's own 2011 book *Elements of Moral Cognition*, and thus harmed Mikhail who has, for several years, been a distinguished law and philosophy professor at Georgetown University with a prolific publication record and long list of invited lectureships. These accusations confuse ordinary intellectual influence for malfeasance, while grossly distorting the history of my ideas and their influence; they do not engage with the primary focus and scope of material discussed in *Moral Minds*; and, they gloss the important difference between an empirical synthesis/trade book and a philosophical treatise/academic book. More importantly, perhaps, even if Harman's concerns were accurate — which they are not — there would be no case of plagiarism, even as he has defined it.

- **Intellectual influence:** The primary intellectual influence on *Moral Minds* was Noam Chomsky, who also influenced Mikhail. Harman is therefore wrong that Mikhail was solely responsible for the ideas in my book, and that Mikhail is primarily responsible for both the conceptual and empirical work post-Rawls on the linguistic analogy; this takes nothing away from Mikhail's important contributions. The linguistic analogy is, fundamentally, a claim about the nature of the mind, anchored in Chomsky's earliest writings about knowledge, representation, computation, and acquisition. These questions rapidly found their way into philosophical and empirical papers on other domains of knowledge, including music, mathematics and morality. Rawls was one of the earliest scholars to pick up on the connection between Chomsky's articulation of language and morality; this was followed by Harman's own writings as well as Susan Dwyer's, who both preceded Mikhail. The strength of Mikhail's work is that he not only delved more deeply into the analogy, but tied it to interesting ideas in the philosophy of action, law, and empirical work in moral development. Thus, although my own writing was influenced by Mikhail, which is why I expressed my debt to him in the Acknowledgment and cited his thesis as well as unpublished papers, the primary influence was Chomsky, who read the book and provided an endorsement on the back jacket.

- **Historical influence:** I was well versed in the philosophical and psychological issues related to the linguistic analogy before reading Mikhail's thesis. In college (circa 1979-1980), I read about Rawls' linguistic analogy in his *Theory of Justice*, and was exposed to trolley-esque problems in 1982 by way of my first graduate advisor, Lewis Petrinovich. Petrinovich was the first scientist to explore folk intuitions about moral dilemmas, and published this work well before Mikhail started doing similar studies. During my years at Harvard, I spoke with Rawls, had several discussions with Chomsky, and was carrying out animal work related to moral psychology. During one conversation with Chomsky, well before we published a paper together in 2002 on language evolution, I asked him why few had applied his intuitions about mind and language to other domains, including morality. He mentioned Mikhail's thesis work and I immediately went out and read it. Nonetheless, I was extremely familiar with the philosophical, cognitive, and empirical literature that was relevant to the linguistic analogy, and was also carrying out work in moral psychology, well before reading Mikhail's thesis. The empirical work soon grew, including collaborative studies with Mikhail, as well as new work with patient populations, brain imaging techniques, human infants, cross-cultural populations, and nonhuman primates.

- **Scope of the book:** *Moral Minds* is a trade book that is primarily about empirical work in moral psychology, its evolution, development, and neurobiological implementation. Mikhail's thesis and papers are academic works focused primarily on philosophical and legal issues. By failing to make this distinction, Harman falsely suggests that *Moral Minds* is nothing without Mikhail's work. This failure is significant as it undercuts his concern that my book took the thunder away from Mikhail, including the publication of his book (published in 2011, five years after my own) which is for an academic audience, and focused on philosophical and legal theory. *Moral Minds* was the first book to show, for a general audience, how the linguistic analogy makes unique empirical predictions about the structure of moral knowledge, how we make judgments, whether they are based on universal principles, how such principles may have evolved (animal work), develop (baby work), and break down (patient work). Thus, the linguistic analogy, and Chomsky's ideas more generally, drive the synthesis and allow for novel predictions. I thus don't see any reason to think that *Moral Minds* undercut Mikhail. Further, I know of no one within academic circles who believes that I, as opposed to Mikhail or Dwyer, was responsible for bringing the analogy back into theoretical focus. Everyone who knows this area recognizes that my contribution has been to use the Chomskyan framework to make empirical discoveries in moral psychology, as well as other domains of knowledge.

- **Citations:** Mikhail is cited repeatedly in *Moral Minds*, and singled out in the Acknowledgment as someone who greatly influenced my thinking. Several scholars, who knew Mikhail and his work in great detail,

read my book in draft form, and not one pointed to inadequacies in citation. Harman believes that in cases where I discussed the same primary material as Mikhail, that I should have cited him as well. But this is absurd, not only in terms of my own writing, but anyone else's, including Harman's¹. I briefly illustrate with a few examples from Harman's essay.

"Hauser pp. 113-121 discusses four "trolley problems," involving Denise, Frank, Ned, and Oscar. Mikhail 2000 (pp. 95-99, 125-35) gives the same account with the same names. Two of the problems are standard (Denise and Frank) and two are new with Mikhail (Ned, Oscar). Hauser does not cite Mikhail from whom he must have taken these examples. (Mikhail discusses several other trolley problems as well.) In addition, Hauser p. 120 adopts Mikhail (2000)'s table format (pp. 105, 128, 131, etc.) to present trolley problems and their salient features."

I indeed used the same names, cases and table as did Mikhail in his thesis, but cited instead our co-authored empirical paper (2007, *Mind & Language*, 22(1): 1–21) because it too used these cases and structure. The paper, rather than the thesis, was more relevant because of the section's focus on empirical evidence.

"Hauser follows Mikhail in discussing the objection that trolley problems are unfamiliar and artificial. Like Mikhail, Hauser notes the significance to linguistics of Chomsky's artificial example, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously."

The issue of artificiality and unfamiliarity has been discussed by many, well before Mikhail, and is about as common a claim in cognitive science as is the idea that the laboratory is artificial. Mikhail rightly recognizes this point in his thesis when he discusses work in the vision sciences, and the progress made with artificial and unfamiliar stimuli. And of course I cite Chomsky's famous sentence, one that is known to every student of cognitive science, and even appears in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

"Many quotations from other writers in Hauser are taken from Mikhail. For example, a quote from Darwin in the front matter of Hauser (Mikhail 200 p. 184); a quote from Hobbes in p. 12 of Hauser (Mikhail, 2000 p. 62); a quote from Kohlberg in p. 16 of Hauser (Mikhail 2000, pp. 21 and 277); a long quotation from Hume on Hauser p. 36 that appears on p. 58 of Mikhail 2000; Hauser pp. 43 has the same lengthy quotation from Rawls that Mikhail 2000 has on pp. 62-3, concerning the linguistic analogy..."

"Taken" is a strong and misleading word. Yes, I quoted from Darwin, Hobbes, Hume, and Rawls, as did Mikhail, and many others before us. Harman's inference that I only read of these scholars by reading Mikhail, and that I should therefore cite Mikhail, is doubly wrong. The Darwin quote provides a useful illustration. As a long time student of evolutionary theory, it seems odd to think that I would have first read of Darwin's famous comment about morality from Mikhail. I didn't. Even if I had, would anyone demand that I cite Mikhail in this context?

I close with two points. First, let me reiterate my respect for Mikhail's work. Through his writings I have learned a great deal, a point acknowledged in *Moral Minds*, in subsequent writings, and virtually every talk I gave on the book. But when Harman states that I, "the established figure has published something based on the ideas of the young researcher," this claim rests on the undeveloped and unsubstantiated phrase "based on." As a long time student of Chomsky's writings, and a co-author with him on two papers, it seems odd to suggest that I would have to read Mikhail to understand Rawls to develop the linguistic analogy. Any student of Chomsky's, including those who took classes with him, know that he has been discussing aspects of the linguistic analogy for years. He has also stated that for the analogy to have any power, it would need to be fleshed out in greater detail and empirically substantiated. Mikhail started the theoretical work in his thesis, and also contributed a short empirical paper. Much of the more detailed theoretical work came after his thesis and my book. Virtually all of the relevant empirical work was synthesized in *Moral Minds*, but all of the new work appeared after its publication. *Moral Minds* owes its greatest debt to the writings of Chomsky. This in no way undermines Mikhail's important work, which is acknowledged.

Second, I believe that Harman has done a disservice to the notion of plagiarism by not only confusing intellectual influence with malfeasance, but also setting up criteria for citations that would make libraries of books and journal publications guilty, wrongly so. If one must cite not only Darwin, Kant, and Hume, but also everyone who cites Darwin, Kant and Hume, it would be necessary to have multiple appendices for every publication just to account for the reference section.

¹ Harman has a one-off line in his essay to the effect that someone pointed out inadequacies in his own referencing, but he says "I do not agree." Readers should see for themselves, and I suggest one of his own single-authored papers on the linguistic analogy (available on his web site), entitled "Using a linguistic analogy to study morality." Here he discusses the moral faculty, I-morality, poverty of the stimulus, and principles and parameters without a single mention of Chomsky who is, among many others, responsible for discussing these issues, and bringing them to the fore in cognitive science. Nor does he cite Mikhail or Dwyer who also discussed these issues in linking language and morality.