



# When to Psychologize

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## ABSTRACT

The central focus of this paper is to motivate and explore the question which is that of, when is it permissible to endorse a psychologizing explanation of a sincere interlocutor? I am interested in the moral question of when (if ever) we may permissibly dismiss the sincere reasons given to us by others, and instead endorse an alternative explanation of their beliefs and actions. I argue that there is a significant risk of wronging the other person, and so we should only psychologize when we are in a position to know that they are in bad faith.

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## 1 Introduction

Consider a case I will call *Xenophobia*:

### **Xenophobia**

You are having lunch with an old friend, and the topic turns to politics. To your dismay, you discover your friend is a staunch supporter of a politician you despise. As you discuss, your friend lists the reasons she supports this politician: economic policies, education policies, energy policies. You bring up reasons that you consider might outweigh her support: foreign policies, immigration policies, care for civil rights. She brushes this off. ‘That’s just talk,’ she says, ‘he doesn’t mean that anyway’. As the conversation continues, you grow suspicious. Could it be that, despite her sincere assertions, she actually supports the politician because she is actually racist and xenophobic?

In this case, you are tempted to endorse what I will call a *psychologizing explanation*. A psychologizing explanation comes in following form: ‘You really believe that because \_\_\_\_\_’ or ‘You really did that because \_\_\_\_\_’ (fill in the blank: ‘you’re racist’, ‘sexist’, ‘chauvinist’, ‘hungry’, ‘homophobic’, ‘hormonal’, ‘biased’, ‘self-deceived’, ... ; the list continues).

The central focus of this paper is to motivate and explore the question which is that of, *when is it permissible to endorse a psychologizing explanation of a sincere interlocutor?* Psychologizing explanations involve a practical stance: when I psychologize, I no longer take the other person’s reasons as authoritative for her.<sup>1</sup> I am interested in the

<sup>1</sup> By practical stance, I mean to draw out that psychologizing directly impacts the interpersonal relationship. I am neutral on whether it requires *belief* or merely acceptance for practical purposes. As a result, what I say here need not require substantive commitments about doxastic wronging [Basu 2019] or moral encroachment [Boling 2020].

moral question of when we may permissibly dismiss the reasons provided by another. The question is pressing because of two co-equal moral commitments. First, we wrong each other when we block each other's reasons from gaining uptake within the moral community. Part of respecting another person is respecting her right to put forward reasons. This includes, on the one hand, interpreting an agent's beliefs and actions in light of her sincerely avowed reasons. And, on the other, it involves considering those reasons when settling one's own views. Secondly, respecting another person's humanity requires that we view them holistically. Human persons are not floating rationalities; they are embodied creatures with cognitive limitations. Respecting another person involves engaging in charitable interpretation that takes into account the realities of embodiment and cognitive limitations. Sometimes the most charitable view of another person is to recognize that they are, for example, self-deceived. When do we take another person's reasons seriously, and when do we go looking for another explanation?

In this paper, I argue that our default should be to accept the reasons our sincere interlocutor offers as genuine for her. This default can be overridden when we are in a position to know that she is mistaken. I begin by explaining what I mean by psychologizing explanations and bad faith. Next, I explain the moral risk of psychologizing. Finally, I close with some thoughts about psychologizing in a particularly fraught arena, political discourse.

## 2 Psychologizing and Bad Faith

The kind of psychologizing explanation I am interested in is one that shows that your sincere interlocutor is deceiving you, or is self-deceived, or is in some way ignorant about her reasons. It culminates in the judgment that she is in (what I will call) *bad faith*.

There are many phenomena that might jump to mind with the term 'psychologizing'. One type—the type I am concerned with in this paper—we might call Dismissive Psychologizing. Dismissive Psychologizing involves dismissing the rational appeals of another person on the grounds that they are not the other person's genuine reasons. A second kind of psychologizing we might call Empathetic Imagination. Empathetic Imagination involves tracing the social and causal antecedents that led a person to adopt the reasons and values she does in fact adopt. For example, if one is dealing with an extremely racist grandparent, one might engage in Empathetic Imagining by thinking, 'Grandparent grew up in a society where these social norms were pervasive; while I disagree with the reasons and values of Grandparent, I can see how someone with their upbringing would come to hold these views'.<sup>2</sup>

Empathetic Imagination is a technique we can use to cope with someone who radically disagrees with us. It helps us come to see how someone with a particular background would come to hold the reasons and values that she holds. Engaging in Empathetic Imagination can lead to increased patience and kindness towards the other person. Empathetic Imagination is humanizing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Baron Reed and Megan Page for pointing out that this form of psychologizing is a humanizing one.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that Empathetic Imagination couldn't be morally problematic. Sincerely held racist beliefs are morally problematic even if they were inculcated in understandable ways. Empathy shouldn't lead to giving others a pass. Thanks to Kathryn Pogin for pressing me on this.

Both can be meaningfully called psychologizing because both involve tracing out the psychological story that led the other person to this point in time. Dismissive Psychologizing results in the judgment that the other person is in bad faith; Empathetic Imagining does not. There are many other phenomena that might deserve to be called psychologizing. In this paper, I am exclusively focused on Dismissive Psychologizing.

Psychologizing explanations involve an assessment of another's reasons for belief or action. They imply that the person is mistaken about her reason (or about its relative weight for her). They involve psychological/causal claims about the person's 'real' reason for her action or attitude. The reason the agent identifies is not playing the role the agent takes it to play. Instead, there is another psychological force at work, and this force identifies the true reason (or true psychological process) at work in the agent.<sup>4</sup>

When it is endorsed, a psychologizing explanation undermines the justifying force of the agent's reason in two ways: (i) it denies that the cited reason is the agent's 'real' reason, and so denies the agent her authority to shape the meaning of her actions; and (ii) it prevents the agent from putting forward her reason for uptake within the moral community. I will discuss both of these features more in the next section.

When we endorse a psychologizing explanation, we adopt a dismissive practical stance towards the other person. We disregard her reasons. We judge that the other person in the conversation is in bad faith. By bad faith, I mean that the reasons the agent puts forward for her action or attitude are not her 'real' reasons. They are not the ones that actually motivate her.<sup>5</sup>

### **Bad Faith**

The agent avows a reason for her action or attitude, although this reason is not what is actually motivating her, and the agent would disavow an accurate account of her motivation.

Bad faith can be *total* (the agent's avowed reason plays no role in motivating her) or *partial* (the agent's avowed reason is not the primary reason motivating her, or the agent's avowed reason does not carry the motivational weight the agent attributes to it). Many cases of bad faith are partial. In partial cases, when the agent cites R as her reason, it is true that R is in some way her reason. But R, on its own, is insufficient to move the agent; R only has the force it does because it is embedded in a larger set of commitments (commitments the agent would sincerely disavow), or R fails to motivate the agent in similar situations, or R is only intelligible as a reason when paired with other commitments that the agent disavows. To illustrate, suppose that Jim is looking to hire a new associate. He judges Kimi would be a bad fit because she is aggressive and loud. He then interviews Chad and judges he will be a good fit

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<sup>4</sup> Mitova [2020] provides a mechanism that captures at least some of the cases I call psychologizing explanations. On Mitova's account, an assessor can dismiss an agent's motivating reasons and instead explain the behavior in mere explanatory terms. This kind of judgment is an epistemic injustice, Mitova argues. I understand psychologizing explanations as a broader category than those Mitova captures. I allow that some psychologizing explanations involve dismissing the agent's sincere motivating reasons in favour of a different set of motivating reasons. But I agree with her conclusion that there is a kind of epistemic injustice that arises when the assessor is incorrect in their psychologizing explanation.

<sup>5</sup> The colloquial notion of *bad faith* is diffuse. The core notion I am using here involves the agent putting forward a deceptive statement. It could involve outright deception (as in the legal usage of bad faith), or self-deception (as in Sartre's usage), or culpable ignorance, that one should have known before putting forward the statement. Unlike Sartre, though, I think bad faith need not involve confusing caused action with free action.

because he is aggressive and loud. It might be true in both cases that ‘prospective employee is aggressive and loud’ plays a role in Jim’s decision. However, this cannot be the whole reason, since in Kimi’s case he concluded it would make her a bad fit, and in Chad’s case he concluded the opposite. Something else must be going on in the background, something that makes the asymmetry intelligible. Let’s suppose that Jim views the traits ‘aggressive and loud’ as positive traits in a man, and negative traits in a woman. Suppose that Jim sincerely says that the reason he didn’t hire Kimi is that she is aggressive and loud. But he would disavow Kimi’s status as woman played any role in his decision. Jim’s bad faith is partial; his reason (Kimi’s aggressive and loud personality) plays a role in his decision, but this reason only moves him because it is embedded in other commitments he denies.

Bad faith can be conscious or unconscious. The person in bad faith could be perfectly self-aware of their motivating reasons yet avow something else in order to manipulate you. They could be trolling or bullshitting you. They could be ashamed of their real reasons. In these cases, they are insincere. However, their bad faith could also be unconscious. They could be perfectly sincere, but inarticulate or self-deceived. We can distinguish between *insincere* Bad Faith (when the agent knowingly avows a reason for her action/attitude that is not her real reason) and *sincere* Bad Faith (when the agent sincerely and mistakenly avows a reason for her action/attitude that is not her real reason). In this paper, I am primarily interested in the permissibility of psychologizing a sincere interlocutor.

The sincere interlocutor genuinely takes herself to be participating in the conversation in good faith. This means she has shouldered the responsibility of exchanging reasons—her real reasons—and so if she fails to know herself, she is failing to meet her responsibility. By engaging in the conversation, she is committed to reporting reasons accurately. A failure to do this is a culpable failure: it means she is in bad faith.

The sincere interlocutor is not unknown, distant, or generally unintelligible. She is reasonably articulate about her reasons, able to engage in reasoning and provide answers to *why?* questions. She need not be someone you know intimately, or someone whose nature you know particularly well. She is your Nana at Thanksgiving, or your neighbour walking her dog.

A nearby question is that of when to psychologize an *insincere* interlocutor. It is possible to be insincerely in good faith. The insincere interlocutor could, by accident, correctly avow her motivating reason. The nemesis who says, ‘I brought you this gift because I love you’ could be speaking the truth, although they intend to deceive you with the statement. Their true motivations are hidden to themselves. But in general, the insincere interlocutor is already in bad faith in virtue of being insincere. And while it is important to consider our moral obligations towards those who knowingly engage with us in bad faith, the harm of psychologizing cannot arise. Insincere bad faith calls for mitigation and repair. While we may yet cause other harms, we are in the context of someone who has already exploited us. In the final section, I will return to this question. For now, I am interested in the case where the other person is sincere.

There are several nearby questions that I am not directly addressing. First, what exactly do I *do* with my sincere interlocutor’s reasons? Do I have a duty to acknowledge them? How much weight should I give them in my own deliberation, or how much weight should they have in a collective deliberation? In what follows, I presume that we do have duties to acknowledge the reasons of our sincere interlocutors. Respecting

the person involves respecting their right to put forward reasons. I will say more about this below. Exactly what weight and role these reasons have is not a question I take up in this paper.

Another nearby question we might consider is that of whether this question is the same as asking whether to take the objective stance (rather than the interpersonal stance, in Strawson's [1962] framework) towards someone? The answer is no. The general structure of engaging in a psychologizing explanation need not involve suspending the reactive attitudes. This is because by identifying the agent's 'real' reason, we may be *locating* the source of blame (for example, implicit, disavowed bias). And further, whether to suspend reactive attitudes is a separate question from that of whether the agent is mistaken about her reasons. Reactive attitudes may still be appropriate after psychologizing the other person. We can and do hold others responsible for having a false consciousness, for being self-deceived, or for being wrong about the motivational force and implications of their reasons.

### 3 The Moral Risk of Psychologizing

When we interact with others, we owe it to them to treat them with respect. One part of treating them with respect involves treating them as a rational agent—one whose acts and attitudes are governed by reasons, and who is equal to you as a fellow rational agent.<sup>6</sup> When we psychologize, we take a practical stance towards the other person. We do not accept their stated reasons as their true reasons. This practical stance may move us to act in various ways: to impugn, to criticize, and to censure the other person, either publicly or privately. In this section, I will discuss two aspects of psychologizing. Some harms depend on our actions, but, I will argue, not all of them do. Psychologizing itself, when done inappropriately, can wrong others.

I'll begin with public psychologizing. Public psychologizing *damages* interpersonal relationships. It is *insulting* to fail to believe sincerely offered testimony.<sup>7</sup> It communicates disrespect. Furthermore, when we publicly psychologize, it has the effect of shutting the other out of the conversation. We perhaps expose them to criticism, censure, and belittling. In effect, we force them out of communal deliberation. We make it difficult (or impossible) for the other person to have uptake in the conversation.

There may be times when it is appropriate to refuse another a place in the conversation. Sometimes, someone's reasons should not have uptake in the conversation because they are abhorrent reasons. If someone casually interjects that we shouldn't worry about racially motivated voter suppression because black people shouldn't be able to vote, this person's comment should not be accepted. But this is because it ought to be *rebutted* or *defeated*. When we reject a reason because it is repugnant or irrelevant, we give it its due (which is not much), and then we put it to rest. But when we psychologize, the reason does not even come up for consideration. Their reasons are silenced from the conversational context.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Jeremy Schwartz for helping me formulate this point.

<sup>7</sup> See Austin 1946, Anscombe 1979, Hazlett 2017, and Malcolm 2018.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the nature and harm of silencing, see Langton 1993, Hornsby 1994, 1995, Hornsby and Langton 1998, as well as McGowan 2004, Maitra 2009, McGowan 2009, Maitra 2012, McGowan 2014, and Kukla 2014. For my purposes, silencing occurs whenever the interlocutor's reasons are forbidden uptake in the conversation. Psychologizing is not the only way that reasons are silenced. They can be silenced due to oppressive social scripts, or by being bald-faced absurd. Thanks to a referee for pointing this out.

I am operating with the idea that everyone has a right to participate in conversation and deliberation, and to be treated equally. Everyone has the right to put forward reasons and defend positions, and they should not be unfairly prevented from participating in discussion.<sup>9</sup> Psychologizing prevents them from participating in discussion, at least with respect to some topic. Suppose that we were mistaken; then we have wrongfully denied the other person their status as a reason-giver. When mistaken, public psychologizing is disrespectful. It may even have the (intended or not) effect of gaslighting the other person.

But let's suppose that we treat the other person 'as if' they were in good faith. Publicly, we nod along with what they are saying, but privately psychologize them. Even if we do not assert our psychologizing stance, even if we do not vocally impugn, criticize, or censure the sincere interlocutor, we can still wrong the other person. We can privately criticize, censure, and belittle the other person, even if we say nothing publicly. And, if we are mistaken, that criticism, censure, and belittling wrong the other person, even if they don't know about it. It's condescending and patronizing. It is disrespectful. Suppose that we treated an expert 'as if' he was an expert, while disregarding everything he says. It would be disrespectful. And if the expert were to discover we only treated him 'as if' he were an expert, it would be appropriate for him to feel insulted. Just so, if the interlocutor were to discover the charade, she would be justified in feeling insulted. So, the harms of silencing can occur even if the other person does not know she has been silenced. When we endorse a psychologizing explanation, the effect is that we silence the sincere interlocutor. The wrong of psychologizing, then, arises whether anything is asserted or suggested publicly. Of course, there are further harms that result when the interlocutor is publicly impugned. As a result, psychologizing has moral stakes. When we psychologize, we risk wronging our sincere interlocutor by silencing them.

Not all silencing is equally harmful. Any time we shut out someone's reasons from the conversation, we wrong them. But it is additionally harmful to shut out their reasons by attributing to them bad motives or irrationality. If we psychologize someone and attribute to them *better* reasons or motives than they in fact have, we have prevented them from engaging in the conversation as an agent. But we have also protected them from censure, or even made them look praiseworthy. By contrast, when we attribute to them bad motives, or patent irrationality, and we are wrong about this, we open them up to unjust criticism and censure. This means that the stakes are higher when we are attributing a criticisable motive to the other person.

All of this might tempt us to say that we should *never* psychologize a sincere interlocutor. But this position should be rejected. Human persons are limited, embodied creatures. They exist within a causal structure. They get hungry, tired, make errors in judgment, and some of these errors are systematic. They are phobic and biased. They are self-deceived. They are not fully rational creatures, and sometimes the best explanation for their beliefs and actions are not the reasons they cite, but sub-personal psychological mechanisms or features that are outside of the agent's awareness. And so psychologizing is something that comes naturally and is sometimes quite appropriate.

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<sup>9</sup> One might wonder (as an anonymous referee did) whether this entails an anti-no-platforming commitment. I think not. It is consistent with this fundamental right that we have norms of when and how one may speak. We cannot all speak at once. Having a right to speak doesn't mean one has a right to *all* platforms. Following Levy [2019], we can say that no-platforming can be justified because of concerns about amplification, provided the agent still has a right to speak somewhere.

Together, these two points show that interpersonal relationships can be fraught. Respecting the other person involves viewing their reasons as authoritative for them. But respecting the other person also involves seeing them as an embodied creature. To fully appreciate the rationality and humanity of our fellow persons, we must engage in *charitable interpretation* [Schroeder 2019]. We must look for the best explanation of them, in a way that respects their capacity to engage in the exchange of reasons, but also in the way that acknowledges their frailty and embodiment. Sub-personal causal influences are *always* present. But when are these features relevant to our uptake of the sincerely held reasons of our interlocutors? I will now turn to this question.

#### 4 But When?

There are many cases where it is unproblematic and even necessary to psychologize others. If you are a cognitive psychologist, a detective, or a hostage negotiator, this is part of your job description. If you find yourself swarmed by internet trolls, you need not take their purported reasons seriously.<sup>10</sup> To flesh out the dimensions at play here, I want to explore several cases. Consider:

##### Therapist

Eve is a trained therapist and Lynn comes to her to work through a traumatic experience. Lynn is suffering from severe low self-esteem that is triggered in a work context. Lynn sincerely tells herself, 'I am struggling at work because I don't know how to excel and my boss hates me'. Lynn is sincere in attributing her struggle to her feelings of inadequacy and her boss's dislike. Eve works to understand the psychological events that trigger this response, and judges that Lynn's response is better explained by Lynn's childhood experience of being unable to please her controlling parents. Eve and Lynn work together to bring Lynn's self-conception in line with this explanation.

A key difference in Therapist is that both Eve and Lynn acknowledge that the patient hopes to revise her self-assessment. The therapeutic context differs from typical assertoric conversational context both in its goals, and the attitudes of the participants. Lynn is not asserting her reasons, instead she is putting forward a felt reality *in order to* question it. And even so, the therapist works carefully to acknowledge and affirm the felt psychological reality. Eve could go wrong if she pigeonholes Lynn into a textbook box. Instead, Eve listens carefully, and draws on her knowledge of psychology to come to understand Lynn's true motivations. This suggests that even a psychologist doesn't rush in to psychologize. Next, consider:

##### Profiler

A profiler, Jamal, is constructing a psychological profile of a crime suspect, Steve, by looking for a psychological explanation of Steve's actions and assertions. Jamal theorizes that committing certain crimes and making certain assertions reflects Steve's problem with authority. Steve takes himself to be driven by the justice of his cause (protecting animal welfare). Suppose Steve is angry that his cause is not being taken seriously. Jamal responds, 'This has nothing to do with your cause; it's motivated by unresolved issues you have with your father!'

Jamal differs from Eve; Jamal and Steve are not engaged in a joint effort of understanding. Steve *feels* disrespected. But is he? If Jamal has better insight into Steve's

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<sup>10</sup> As discussed above, if the person is trolling, they are already in bad faith. There is a question over how to tell whether they are trolling, but this is distinct from the question of this paper.

motivations, then Steve doesn't have grounds to insist Jamal adopt a false interpretation. It seems that disrespect will track whether or not Jamal is in a position to know Steve's true motivations.

We can see this point when we consider another case. The bi-polar person, in the grip of mania, is overwhelmingly authentic. He can be utterly convincing when giving reasons for his positions, and draws others into that magnetism. Even so, sincere love and concern for the manic person with bi-polar might involve psychologizing them, ignoring their sincere pleas and instead guiding them to seek treatment. And even if psychologizing the person is the right response, the person may still feel wronged, unheard, misunderstood. Yet, psychologizing seems to be the thing to do if the bi-polar condition is known. In contrast to the case of the bi-polar person and Profiler, consider:

### **Hormonal**

Sarah tells her employee, Brad, that his work is subpar, and his performance must improve in several specific ways if he is to continue as her employee. Brad rejects this assessment and psychologizes Sarah as follows: he judges that she doesn't really think his work is subpar, but is instead just lashing out at him because she is 'hormonal' and 'too emotional'.

Hormonal represents what I take to be a clear case in which psychologizing is wrong. Brad's attitude is insulting and disrespectful to Sarah because he fails to believe her sincere testimony that his job performance is subpar. Indeed, Brad's response presents a paradigmatic case of testimonial injustice [Fricker 2007; Marusic and White 2018]. The harm of a testimonial injustice, as described by Miranda Fricker, involves a failure to recognize someone in her capacity as a knower. On Fricker's account, Brad's psychologizing wrongs Sarah because it fails to recognize something essential to her humanity, namely her status as an epistemic agent. Contrast Hormonal with:

### **Hungry**

You disagree with your partner over where to go to dinner. She becomes more and more adamant that you should go to a place nearly an hour outside of town. You don't like that place, and don't want to wait over an hour to eat. As the disagreement grows, you realize that she is probably suffering from dangerously low blood sugar. From your long history with her, you know that she doesn't realize that her blood sugar is low, and you suspect that her preferences and reactions would be different if her blood sugar were normal. You suggest that perhaps she should eat a bite of a granola bar (you keep them on hand, knowing that she has this condition). She is furious with you for disregarding her preferences.

In Hungry, it seems permissible to psychologize your partner. But what is the difference between psychologizing your partner as 'hungry' and psychologizing a woman as 'hormonal'? The cases are the same in that they involve rejecting the person's stated reasons and not allowing those reasons uptake into the conversation. In both cases, we view the psychological explanation as undermining the force of the reasons. Could the difference between the two cases be the *truth* of the psychologizing claim? I think not. In both cases, we have an underlying physiological fact—low blood sugar, hormone imbalance. Does this fact undermine a person's reasons? It seems like they are likely to function in similar ways, making the person grumpy, making them have a reaction they would not have without the underlying physiological condition. But insisting a hungry partner eat doesn't wrong her; dismissing a woman for being hormonal does. How can we explain this asymmetry?

The key lies in the reliability of the practice of applying the psychologizing explanation. Hungry involves an intimate interpersonal history, one that involves many



instances of caring for the other person, and finely tuned knowledge of the partner's reactions. You have a track record for psychologizing in instances of suspected low blood sugar, and this track record suggests that feeding your partner is the best response. By contrast, Hormonal occurs in a context of systematic dismissal of the input of women due to (real or imagined) hormonal influences. The track record of psychologizing women due to suspected hormonal imbalance has resulted in the historic silencing of women in entire spheres of influence [Fricker 2007]. To psychologize a woman as hormonally unbalanced participates in a deeply entrenched social signaling (however intended) of disrespect. Or to put it another way, being hormonal may undermine one's reasons in some cases. But it is part of a general social trope that has been applied in many wrong situations. The socially sanctioned norm of attributing hormones to a woman is vastly unreliable, even if there is a psychological reality that it could be made to track.

And so Hungry differs from Hormonal because Hungry involves deep personal knowledge of the other person, implemented within a context where psychologizing has a positive track record. Hormonal appropriates a socially sanctioned but unreliable norm of dismissing the input of women and (even if it is not intended to have this force) communicates disrespect. In Hungry, the judgment is reliable; in Hormonal it is not.

I began this paper with the case Xenophobia. When talking to your friend, who earnestly tells you why she prefers a political candidate, you begin to suspect that the real reason she supports the candidate is because she's racist and xenophobic. In this case, you suspect that she is self-deceived about her reasons for supporting the candidate. She is sincerely reporting what she believes, but you suspect she's just wrong about it.

Like Xenophobia, Profiler is also a case where self-deception is suspected. It seems to me that while the psychologizing of the profiler is permissible and appropriate, it does undermine any opportunity for a genuine interpersonal relationship. Unlike Hungry, where the suspension of the interpersonal discourse was temporary while blood sugar was low, in the case of Profiler there is no way to psychologize without harming the interpersonal relationship indefinitely (with respect to these reasons). Once you judge that the other person is in the grip of self-deception, you can try to convince them of it, but until they come to see the problem, you won't be able to exchange reasons.

This highlights a general question for psychologizing the self-deceived. Suppose—as presumably the profiler knows—that you *know* that the other person is sincere, but self-deceived about their reasons. It seems plausible that in the case you know that the other person is self-deceived, it is permissible to psychologize them. After all, you *know* that the reasons they claim are not their real reasons (and you know that they do not know this). But *knowing* that someone is self-deceived is rare. More likely we suspect it. And if we merely suspect they are self-deceived, we risk wronging them by getting it wrong. The first step of paradigmatic cases of gaslighting involves excluding someone from the conversation by impugning the legitimacy of their offered reasons. Kate Abramson [2014], in her discussion of gaslighting, argues that this is one of the moral harms brought about by gaslighting.

Of course, it is no help to say that it is permissible to psychologize the self-deceived when you know they are self-deceived. To know they are self-deceived is to believe that they are self-deceived. To believe that they are self-deceived is to have already psychologized them. So it cannot be that you may psychologize someone only when you know them to be self-deceived. The strongest claim we could make is this: if you would know

that they are self-deceived by psychologizing, then it is permissible to psychologize. This can help us make judgments about whether an instance of psychologizing was correct, but it is not an actionable principle. The result is a strong argument for a presumption of non-psychologizing. An actionable version of the principle would be something like, psychologize only when you have evidence that would be sufficient for knowledge.

What if you have great evidence but still go wrong? Here, I think we would say that you should not have psychologized, but it is excusable because you had good evidence. This is analogous for how we think about excuses in other contexts. It is impermissible to take someone else's lunch from the office fridge. However, if someone puts your name on an identical lunch, and you grab it by mistake (because the appearance and name is ordinarily sufficient for you to know it is your lunch), you are excused from blame. It doesn't negate that the thing you did was impermissible. You did wrong, but you are excused from blame.

In general, there are two ways to go wrong by psychologizing. The first way is to identify psychological factors that are irrelevant to something having the status of a reason for the agent. For example, suppose that my interlocutor, Mary, rejects the analytic/synthetic distinction in philosophy. I could psychologize by saying, 'You only believe that because you went to Harvard'.<sup>11</sup> I am suggesting that Mary's arguments aren't her real reasons, but rather the real reason is a causal process (the process of receiving an education at Harvard). While these causal features *are* a part of how she acquired this belief, they need not undermine her reasons for rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction.<sup>12</sup> She would say, 'No, I reject the analytic/synthetic distinction because of these arguments. The fact I went to Harvard is not my reason, it only put me in contact with my reasons'.

Another version of my charge would be that I have made a debunking claim: Mary doesn't have a *good* reason for her rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction because a Harvard education doesn't lead to a balanced understanding of the issue. This second interpretation of the psychologizing charge is more along the lines of empathetic imagination. I can trace out the causal process that led Mary to adopt the reasons she in fact adopted. And I think those reasons aren't objectively good ones. Philosophers have taken up this question (see White [2010], Schoenfield [2014, forthcoming], Avnur and Scott-Kakures [2015], and Vavova [2018]). This is a neighbouring question to mine. Even if the debunking explanation is true, it need not undermine whether something has a status of a motivating reason for the agent. It has the status of motivating reason, even if the debunking argument shows it is not an objective reason.<sup>13</sup> There is a second way to go wrong. In this case, the

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<sup>11</sup> See Cohen 2000 for a first-person description of this case. Cohen is worried about whether the fact he went to Oxford undermines the justification of the belief *for him*. I am concerned with the harm that comes with second hand dismissal of the belief.

<sup>12</sup> One could imagine a case where they do; the agent was able to fake her way through exams by mimicry, never internalized any of the arguments, and indeed only rejects the distinction because of a past pattern of causal behaviour, not because she has any grasp of the arguments. But this is not usually the case with those educated at Harvard to reject the analytic/synthetic distinction.

<sup>13</sup> Debunking claims and partial bad faith can be difficult to disentangle. The modal profile between the two claims is similar: without the causal story, the reason wouldn't have the force that it in fact does. The difference can be picked out by distinguishing *enabling* conditions from *motivating reasons*. In the case of an enabling condition, any cause that puts the reason in place will be sufficient for the agent to believe/act. But when the agent is in bad faith, the stated motivating reason will not be enough to move the agent.

psychologizing explanation is false. You attribute duplicity to your interlocutor, but she is in fact honest. You attribute to her a headache that is making her unreasonable, and she doesn't have one.

Here I will bring together the above reflections into a proposal. Psychologizing can wrong a sincere interlocutor by silencing her reasons. Psychologizing wrongs another when the psychologizing explanation is false. The risk of wronging someone raises the moral stakes. As a result, it is not permissible when there are no grounds for thinking that the person is compromised in some way. Profiler and Hungry support the idea that:

**Psychologize**

It is permissible to psychologize when you are in a position to know the other person is in bad faith.

Therapist represents a possible challenge to Psychologize. At the outset of therapy, Eve may not be in a position to know that Lynn is in bad faith. Lynn comes to Eve looking for self-improvement, inviting Eve to psychologize her. Together, Eve and Lynn embark on a joint endeavour to better understand Lynn. They might try out many hypotheses before discovering the right one. This illustrates an important distinction: to hypothesize a psychologizing explanation is different from endorsing one. We can engage in hypothetical reasoning about others without judging that the explanation is true. It is the judgment, which shifts our practical stance towards the other person, that has the potential to result in harm.<sup>14</sup> Eve should not endorse a psychologizing explanation of Lynn until she is in a position to know she has landed on the right one. As a result, Therapist is consistent with Psychologize.

What about the initial case of interest, Xenophobia? Are you in a position to *know* your friend is in bad faith? It is possible that she is truly motivated by the things she claims, thus you cannot rule this out. And you do not have any insight into *her* that would tell you one way or the other. So, unless you have additional evidence, you should not pre-judge your friend. I've argued above that the risk of harm to your sincere interlocutor (gaslighting, silencing) means that psychologizing should not be undertaken lightly. And so, you ought to engage your friend, seek to persuade her, and refrain from psychologizing until you have more evidence.

What would it take to be in a position to know that someone is in bad faith? This is a question of knowing the hidden motivations of others. Interpersonal relationships often offer knowledge of the character and values of the other person. From this knowledge, we can grasp the motivations that animate a particular action. We can also understand someone's motivations through the testimony of others, and through a track record of interacting with them. Other sources—such as an immediate awareness or a gut instinct—could put one in a position to know if they are sufficiently reliable. The exact epistemological story will depend on which indicators reliably reveal someone's motivations.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In non-therapeutic contexts, hypothesizing could be enough for wronging. Suppose that Brad responds to Sarah, 'are you sure this is really about me, or are you just hormonal?' It's merely a question, although it has the same effect. This is because the question carries an assertoric force in the conversational context, that Sarah is (likely) just hormonal. The burden is now on her to show she is not. Similarly, if Brad merely contemplates the question, this could shift his assessment of Sarah's credibility, even if he doesn't make an explicit judgment. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me on this point.

Here is one possibility to consider in the case of Xenophobia. Recent work in critical race theory and feminist epistemology has called to attention the ways in which members of dominant class live in motivated ignorance about the social and racial injustices faced by marginalized groups. Moreover, they may also live in motivated ignorance about their own internalized racist and sexist attitudes. One potential objection to my analysis of Xenophobia is that we have a standing reason to psychologize any member of a dominant group about their reasons in contexts that involve social and racial injustice. Even if members of a dominant group are sincere, we can never give their professed reasons much weight because they are (likely) born of self-deception. This argument could make use of recent work in non-ideal epistemology. Some have argued that false consciousness is pervasive [Medina 2013]. Others have argued that members of the dominant class are ignorant, and motivated to remain that way [Mills 2007]. Based on this work, someone could argue that given your friend is a member of the dominate class, the work of Mills and Medina gives you a good reason to psychologize her.<sup>16</sup> Given the massive bad faith regarding judgments that impact racial minorities and immigrants, we have a standing reason to think basically everyone is in bad faith until proven otherwise. Call this the *Motivated Ignorance Defeater*.

Does the Motivated Ignorance Defeater put you in a position to know that the individual before you is self-deceived with respect to her motivations? Let's grant that the claims of the sweeping narrative are true. Most members of the dominant class are culpably ignorant of the challenges faced by social and racial minorities. Furthermore, there are structural social features that protect a member of the dominant social class from being exposed to information that would challenge their view of the world. There is a lot we could say about this, but I want to examine two versions of this case.

On the first version, the friend at lunch has internalized the racist and sexist attitudes of the dominant culture. She uses the socially acceptable answers to the questions, without even realizing that they are not her true motivations. She is self-deceived. When you psychologize her, you are seeing her much better than she sees herself.

But there is a second version. Here, the friend at lunch has been so well protected from unpleasant truths by the dominant culture that she speaks truly when she ranks economic well-being over concerns for civil rights. She genuinely does not think that there is any risk of harm to civil rights. She has not internalized the racist and sexist attitudes of the dominant culture (and this would be revealed by a counterfactual test, where she is put in a different situation with a different set of available evidence). She is not self-deceived, she's just ignorant. And while she's situated in a system that perpetuates ignorance, she herself is not motivated to maintain her ignorance. If you were to psychologize in this case, you would wrong her. You would view her as self-deceived when she is not. You would silence her as a participant in the conversation.

One might resist this conclusion. The chance that your friend is actually ignorant is vanishingly small. The evidence is sufficiently strong and clear that civil rights are endangered, only a psychologizing explanation could explain her lack of concern.<sup>17</sup> But this response presumes that the evidence is evenly distributed and digested.

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<sup>16</sup> Mills and Medina themselves do not endorse this stronger claim. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me articulate this point.

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to an anonymous editor for this objection.

A different explanation is that your friend is stuck in an epistemic bubble or an echo chamber and either has not encountered the information, or distrusts the sources of the information [Nguyen 2020]. While her distrust might be manipulated or irrational, it doesn't mean she's in bad faith.

Given that, from the outset of the conversation, you cannot know which version of your friend is correct, I think you must wait to psychologize. You must take her reasons seriously and provide rebuttal. If she refuses to play the reasons game, then that's fine. But the presence of a Motivated Ignorance Defeater is not sufficient to justify psychologizing your friend. It is bad reasoning to move from 'many members of this group are X' to 'Thus, this member of the group has X'.<sup>18</sup> Even if we are in a position to know that members of a dominant group often internalize attitudes that are racist, this does not give us sufficient grounds to dismiss the sincere interlocutor.

It is tempting to psychologize (and pathologize) others. There are cases where this is clearly permissible. But in cases where the other is a sincere interlocutor, psychologizing can wrong them. Even in cases where one suspects that the other person might be self-deceived or psychologically compromised in some way, there is moral reason to engage them and their reasons directly. And so, when you suspect your friend is xenophobic, you ought to set that aside and engage with her reasons directly.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on duties to *sincere* interlocutors. But what if the other person is not sincere? Or you have reason to doubt their sincerity? What if they are grandstanding? Or a political opponent? The sincerity condition requires that they are taking the exchange in good faith, as an exchange of reasons. But if their sincerity is called into doubt, then the exchange can no longer be taken at face value. What are we to do then? Political discourse presents a particularly pressing forum to examine the moral stakes of psychologizing when sincerity is questioned. Political discourse is rife with psychologizing. People endorse something like the following narrative: Our team supports these policies for good reasons. The other team opposes policies because they are monsters who derive pleasure from harming innocents. The other team avows 'other reasons' for their views, but of course they are just lying or self-deceived.

My argument in this paper identifies why this practice is corrosive in political discussions. If the other team is sincere, psychologizing explanations are insulting. In particular, psychologizing explanations at work in political discourse are insulting in the extreme. They involve explanations that make the opponent a moral monster. We cannot have a public discussion between sincere parties that turns on psychologizing explanations. To put the point more strongly, charging another with being in bad faith—if the opponent is in fact not in bad faith—is disrespectful, dehumanizing, and wrong.

The most obvious conclusion is that we must recognize the moral risk of charging our opponents with being in bad faith. No doubt, many political personalities are in bad faith. But this does not mean we can dismiss their followers with a blanket statement. We can condemn ideologies and forms of reasoning, but we should not attribute bad faith to an opponent without good justification.

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<sup>18</sup> For a careful discussion of why statistical likelihood is not enough to justify believing something of someone, see Bolinger 2017, Gardiner 2018, Munton 2019, and Basu 2019.

The second conclusion is this. Political discourse cannot exist when everyone is viewed as being in bad faith. And so, even when bad faith pervades, there could still be a didactic value to taking the insincere interlocutor sincerely. It models what good norms of conversation look like. Even in political discourse—where there seems to be ample evidence that people are not engaging in the conversation in good faith—we should be careful about when we throw around psychologizing explanations. Political discourse cannot be healthy if we cannot expect others to be sincere. And perhaps the only way back is to treat each other as sincere until new norms are forged.

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