

THE COGNITIVE FOUNDATIONS OF PERSONAL AUTONOMY

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THE BIG QUESTION:

Does moral action depend on reasoning?

Robert A. George

Yes and no, happily.

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

[Click here to see
what the experts say](#)

JOHN TEMPLETON
FOUNDATION

Outline

On the need for closer links between cognitive science and moral philosophy

Personal autonomy

Dual process theory and Haidt's challenge to 'moral rationalism'

Response to Haidt by Mackenzie and Kennett

Problems with dual process theory

Expertise, moral judgment, and personal autonomy

ON THE NEED FOR CLOSER LINKS
BETWEEN COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND
MORAL PHILOSOPHY

There is a rich body of theory on core issues of moral philosophy

Responsibility

Personhood

Morally competent agents

Personal autonomy

Moral agency requires certain cognitive and other capacities

Moral theory assumes that:

people actually have these capacities,

they routinely use them.

These assumptions aren't, for the most part, empirically validated.

This leaves moral theory vulnerable.

Shoring up this gap requires

Systematic grounding of moral theory in cognitive science.

Specifically:

Demonstration that the cognitive assumptions of moral theory are empirically supported.

?

Basic autonomy

Personal
autonomy

Cognitive
foundations

PERSONAL AUTONOMY

Autonomy as self-government

Various interpretations of self-government:

Bioethics: informed consent.

Rational choice theory: voluntary, rational choice.

Libertarians: right to freedom from interference.

Rawlsian liberals (Kantian): the capacity for rational self-legislation.

-The defining feature of persons.

(Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000)

The central question for theories of autonomy

What distinguishes autonomy-enhancing from autonomy-undermining influences on will.

Standard cases:

coercion,

brainwashing,

mental illness,

addiction.

Remember that autonomy = personhood.

Note that reduced autonomy corresponds to reduced responsibility.

Goal-directedness versus autonomy

Brain-washing:

the agent is goal-directed,

but not autonomous.

Cf. Frankfurt's wanton.

Personal autonomy depends on reflection

The capacities to:

reflect on one's motivational structure,

change it in response to reflection.

In combination these provide responsiveness to *one's own* reasons.

Contrast:

brainwashing,

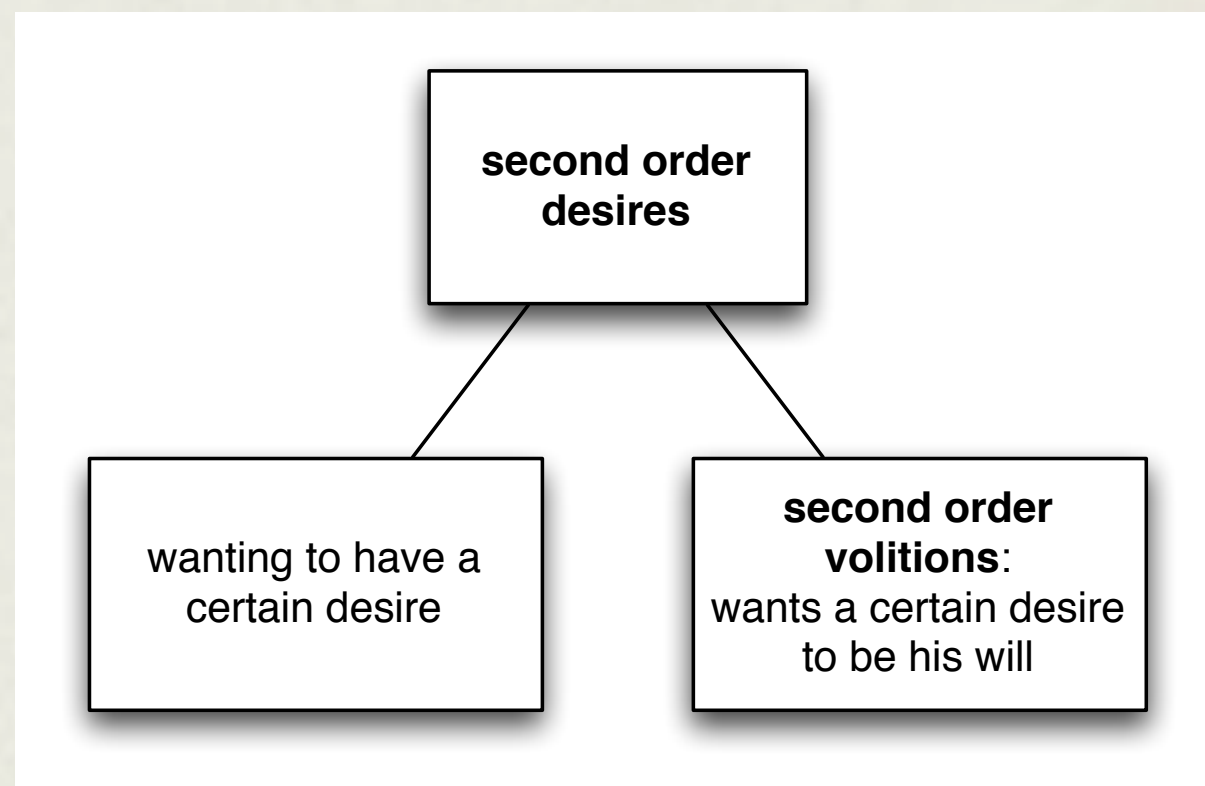
addiction.

Coherentism
+
Reasons responsiveness

Coherentism

Frankfurt (1971): humans are unique in having second order desires.

Self-reflective evaluation.



Unresolved conflict amongst second order desires can destroy a person.

Reasons responsiveness

An agent does not really govern herself unless she is responsive to a sufficiently wide range of reasons for and against behaving as she does.

Relational autonomy

Two core claims:

- (1) autonomous agents are constituted in interpersonal relations,
- (2) autonomy can be impaired by oppressive social relations.

The Taliban woman (Oshana 2003).

Historical-procedural approaches (Christman 1991).

Substantive approaches (Mackenzie 2008).

Self-respect, self-trust, self-esteem.

These complexities need not concern us

I'm going to focus on reflection.

Reflection is at least central to the standard conception of personal autonomy.

I'm going to assume that (other things being equal):

reduced capacity for reflection → reduced autonomy,

enhanced capacity for reflection → enhanced autonomy.

DUAL PROCESS THEORY AND HAIDT'S CHALLENGE TO 'MORAL RATIONALISM'

Dual process theory

Table 2 Clusters of attributes associated with dual systems of thinking

System 1	System 2
Cluster 1 (Consciousness)	
Unconscious (preconscious)	Conscious
Implicit	Explicit
Automatic	Controlled
Low effort	High effort
Rapid	Slow
High capacity	Low capacity
Default process	Inhibitory
Holistic, perceptual	Analytic, reflective

(Evans 2008)

Dual process theory has been used to de-emphasise reasoning

E.g. Camerer et al. (2004):

Traditional view focuses entirely on reasoning,
at the expense of implicit processes.

Economic models represent decisions in deliberative equilibrium:
further deliberation would not alter the choice.

Yet people often choose without much deliberation:
behavior is strongly influenced by affect.

Hence, proper recognition of system 1 will revolutionize economics.

Haidt's challenge to moral rationalism

Mark and Julie:

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love?

(Haidt 2001)

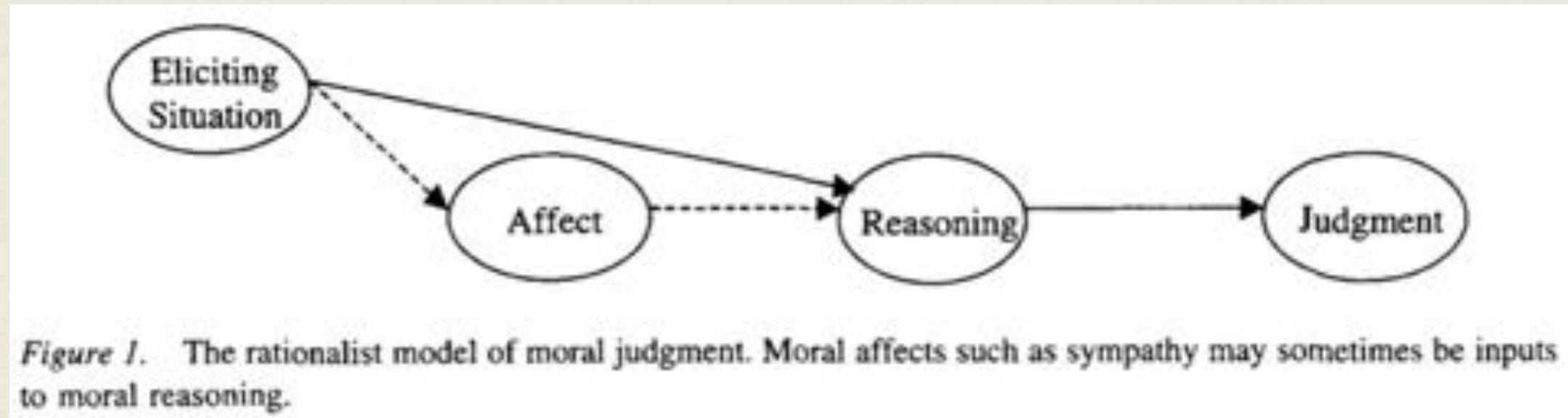
Moral dumbfounding

Subjects express a firm judgment but are unable to provide reasons to support their judgment.

Other examples:

chicken carcass, ...

The rationalist model of moral judgment



(Haidt 2001)

The social intuitionist model of moral judgment

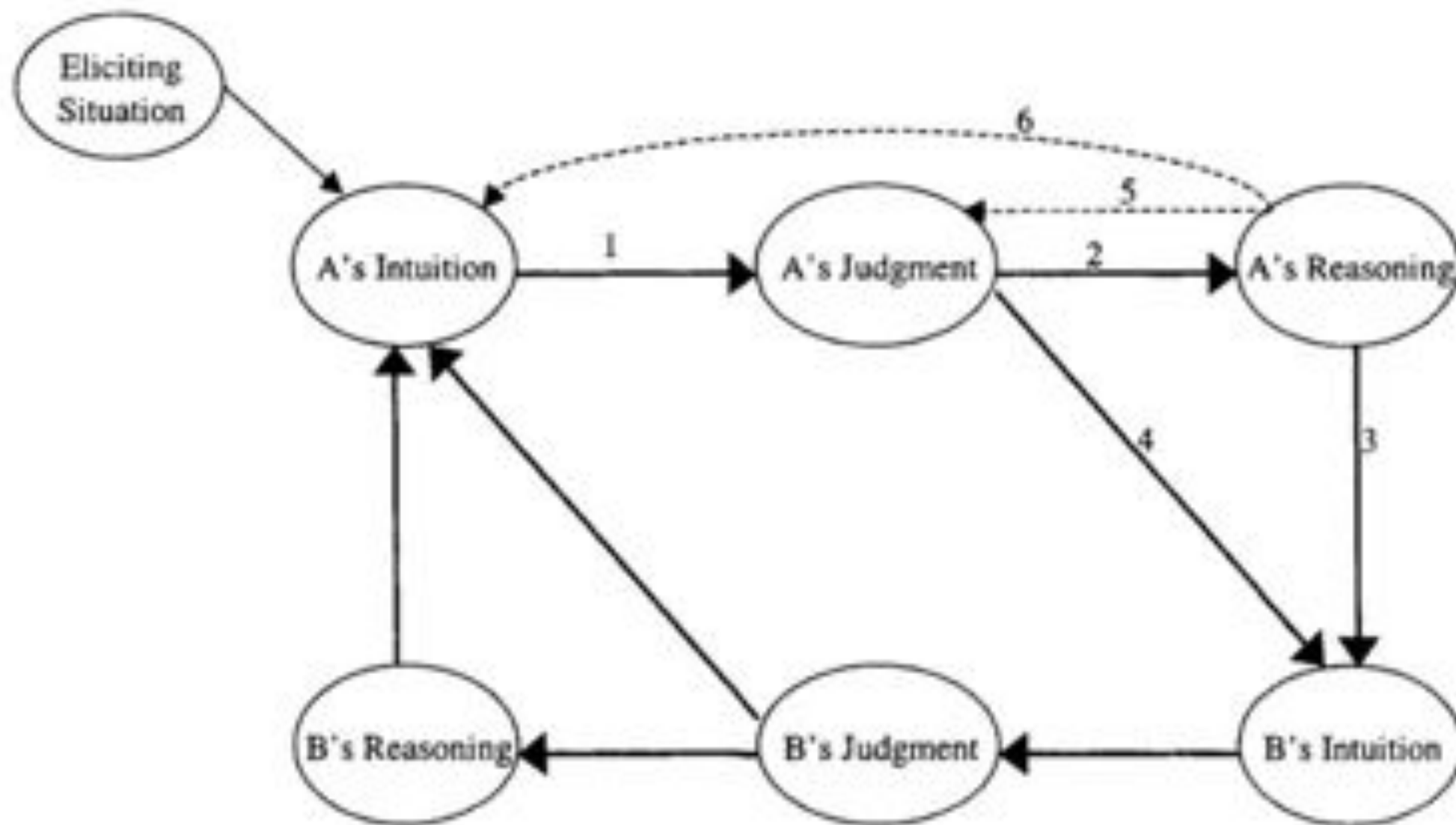
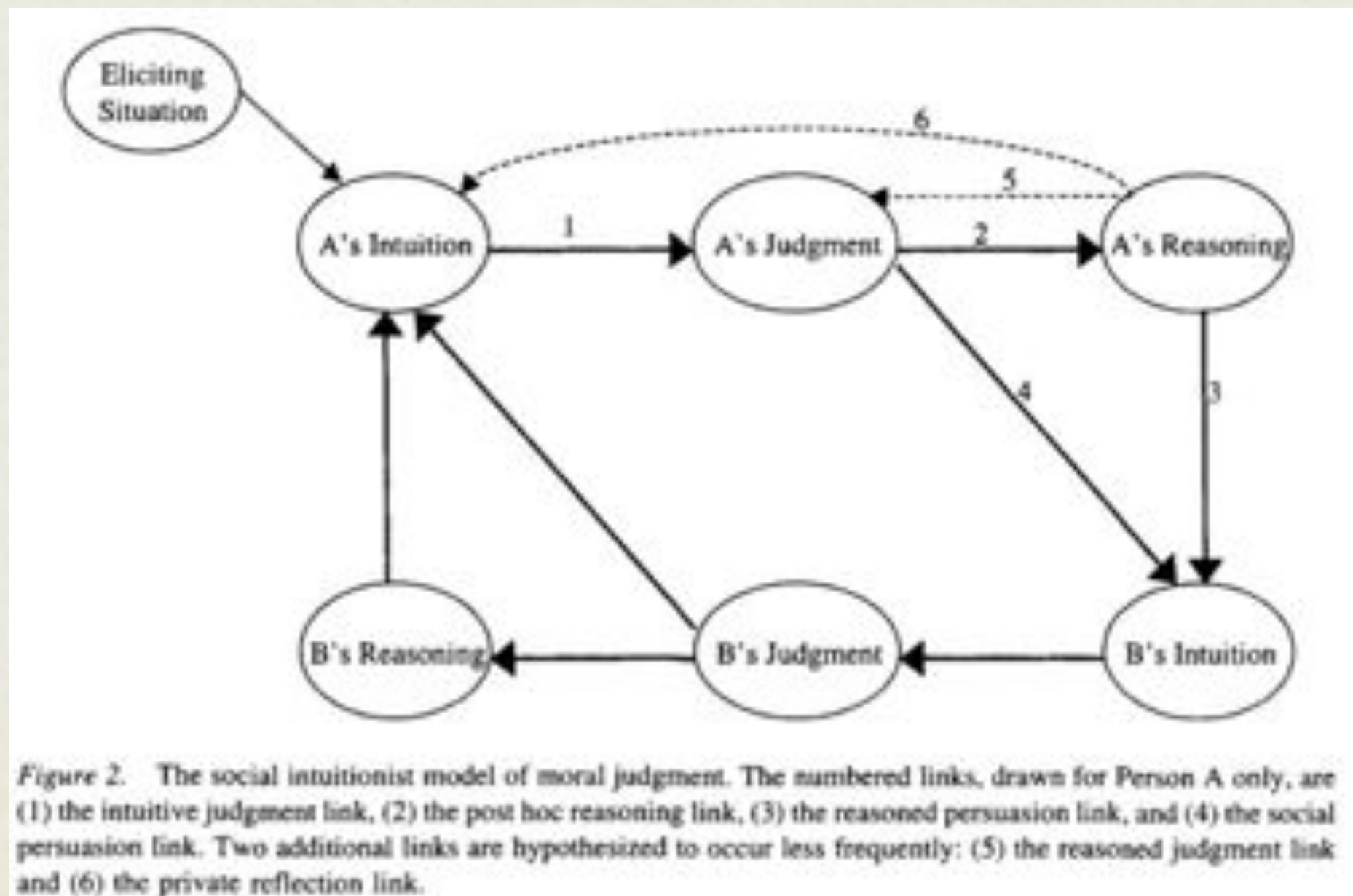


Figure 2. The social intuitionist model of moral judgment. The numbered links, drawn for Person A only, are (1) the intuitive judgment link, (2) the post hoc reasoning link, (3) the reasoned persuasion link, and (4) the social persuasion link. Two additional links are hypothesized to occur less frequently: (5) the reasoned judgment link and (6) the private reflection link.

(Haidt 2001)

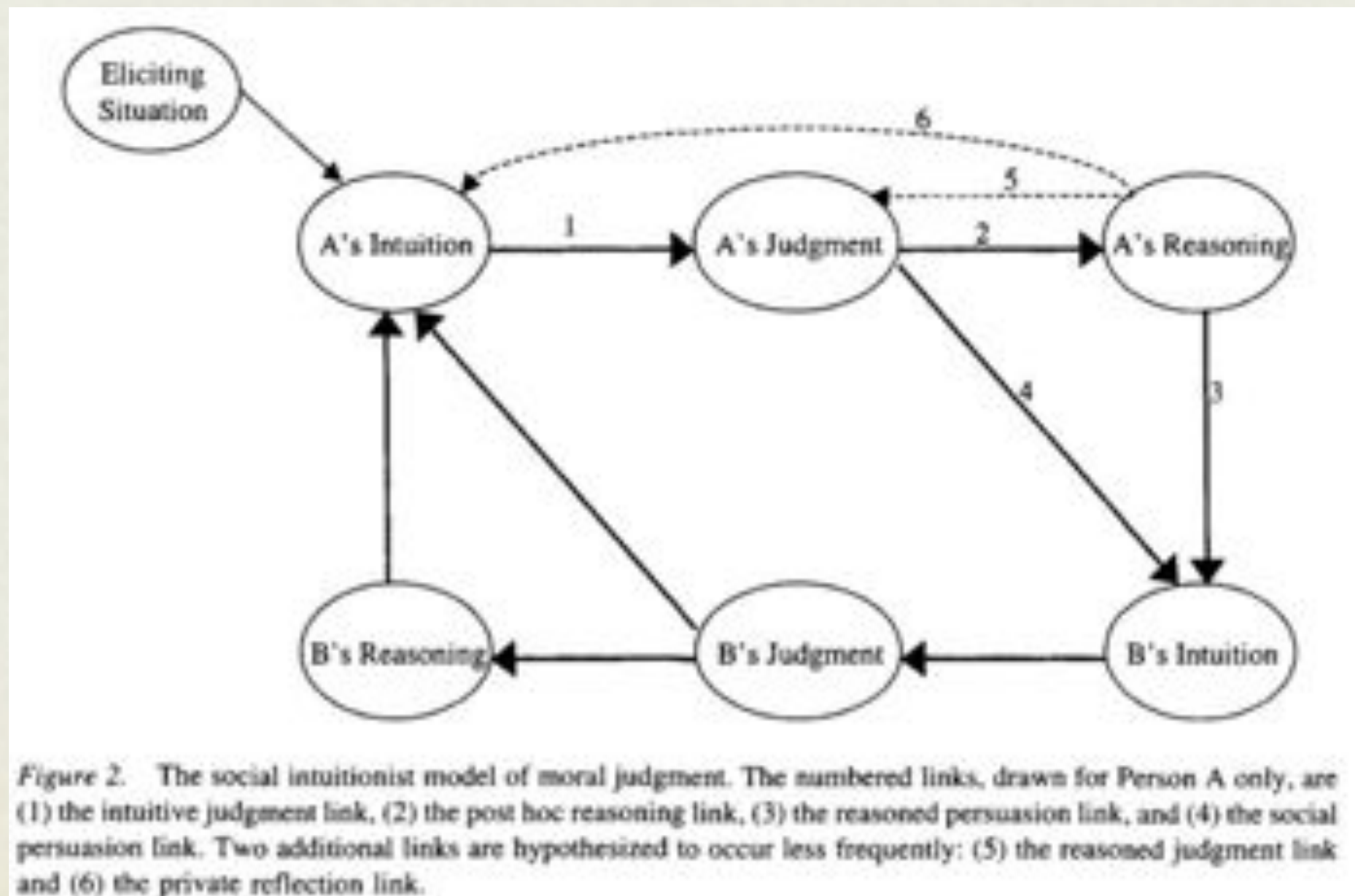
1 The intuitive judgment link

Moral judgments appear effortlessly as the result of moral intuitions.



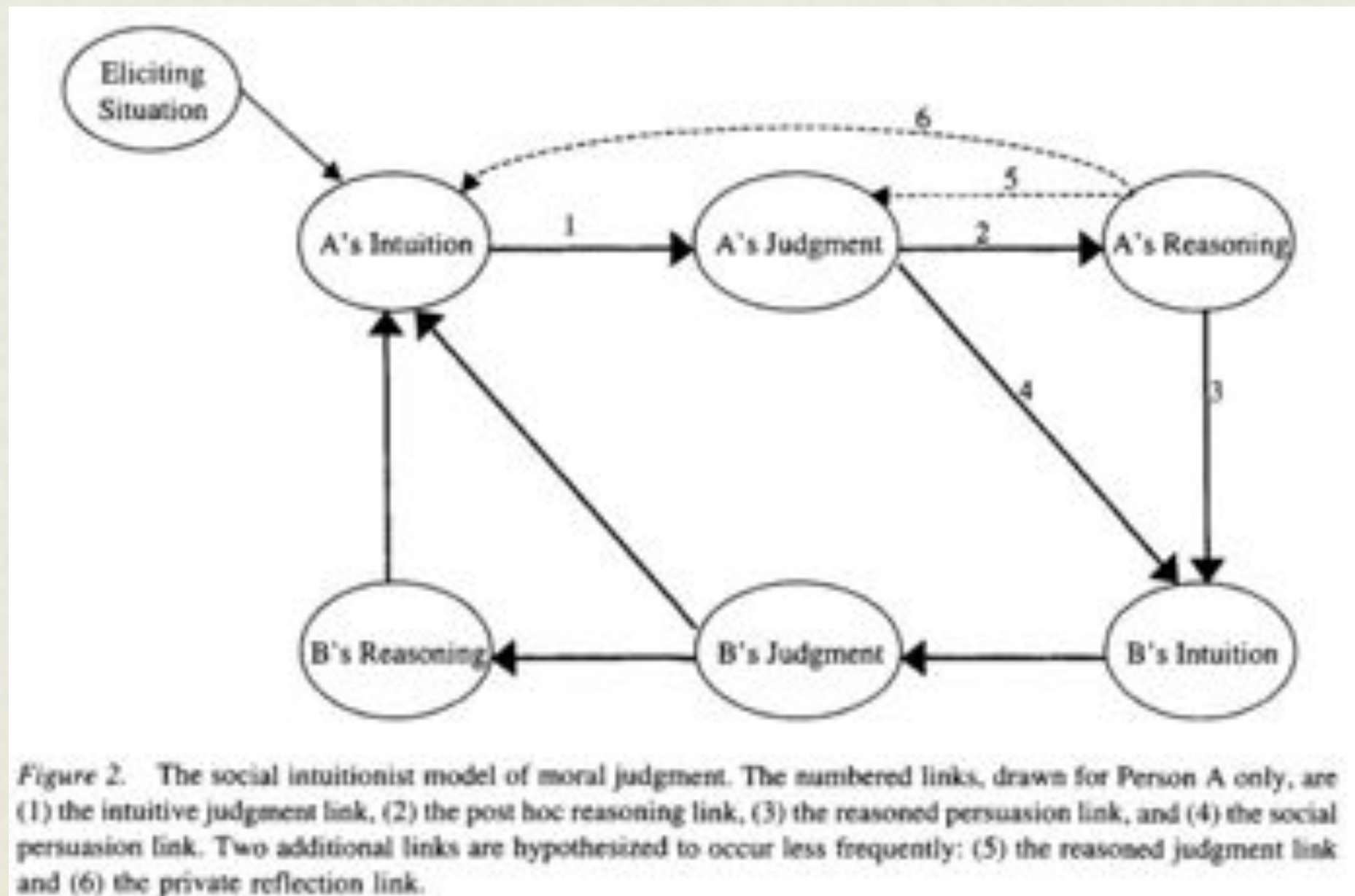
2 The post hoc reasoning link

Moral reasoning is engaged after a moral judgment is made to support an already-made judgment.



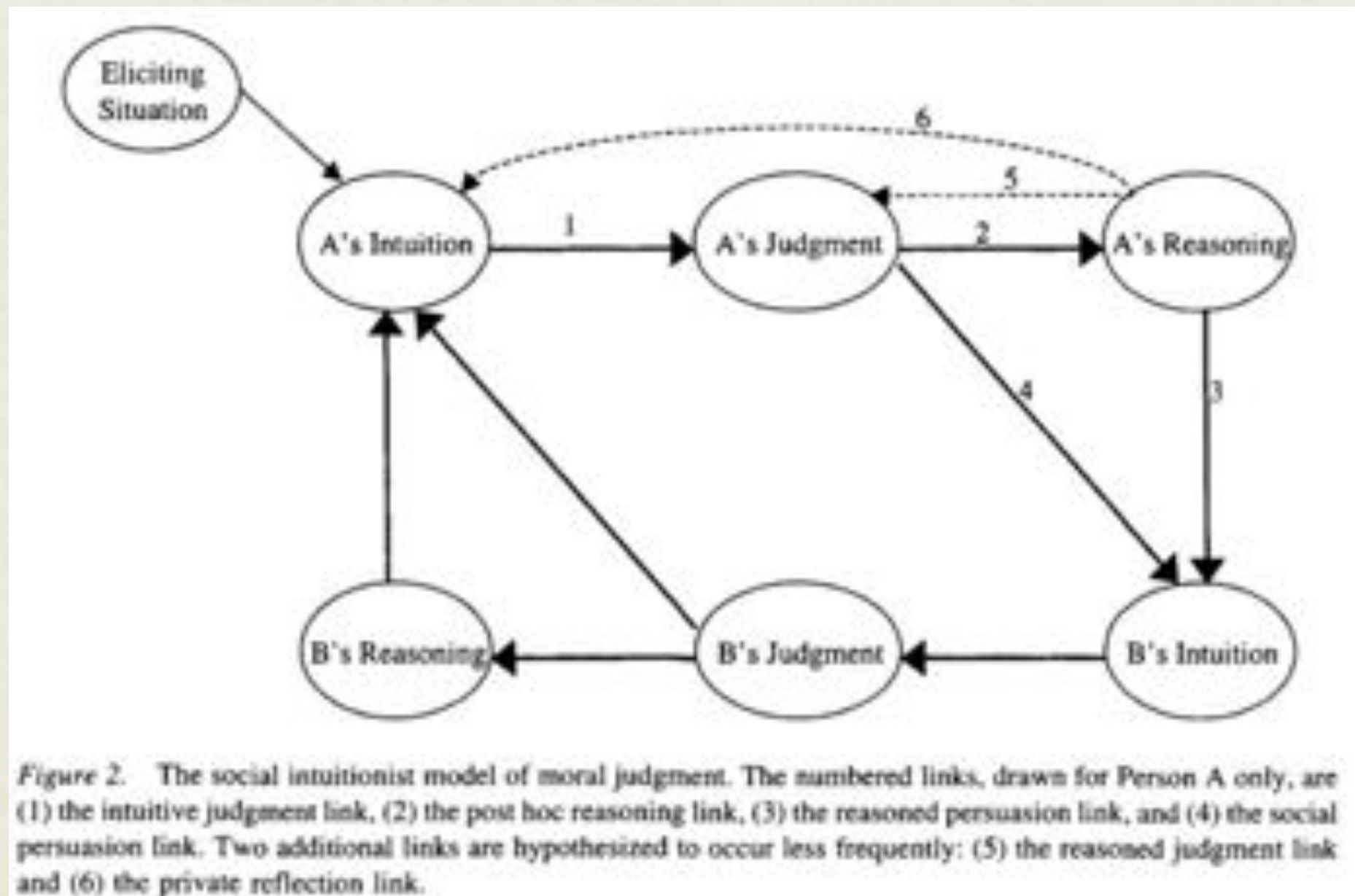
3 The reasoned persuasion link

Moral reasoning is produced verbally to justify one's already-made judgments to others.



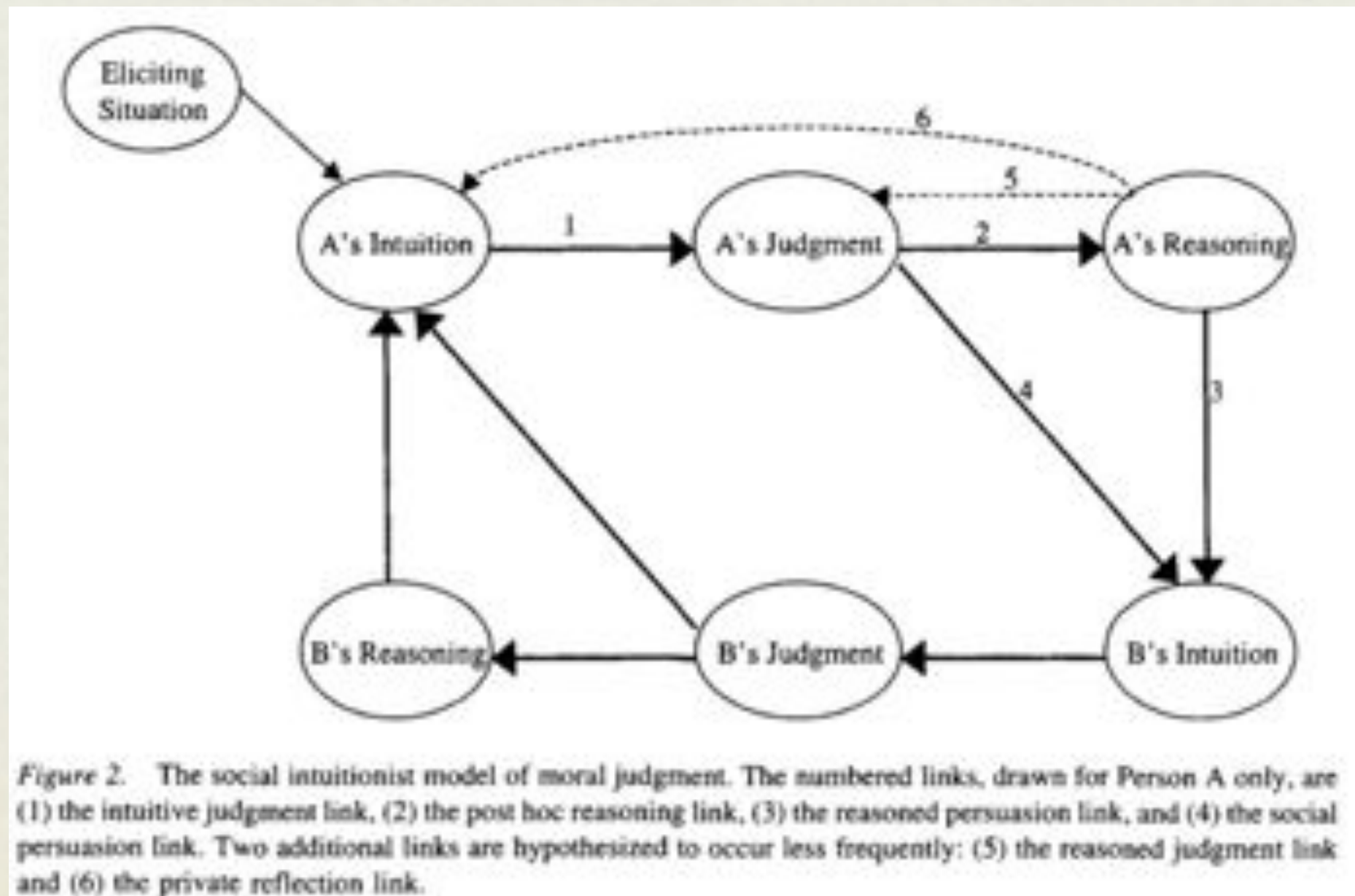
4 The social persuasion link

The moral judgments of others exert a direct influence on one's own judgment.



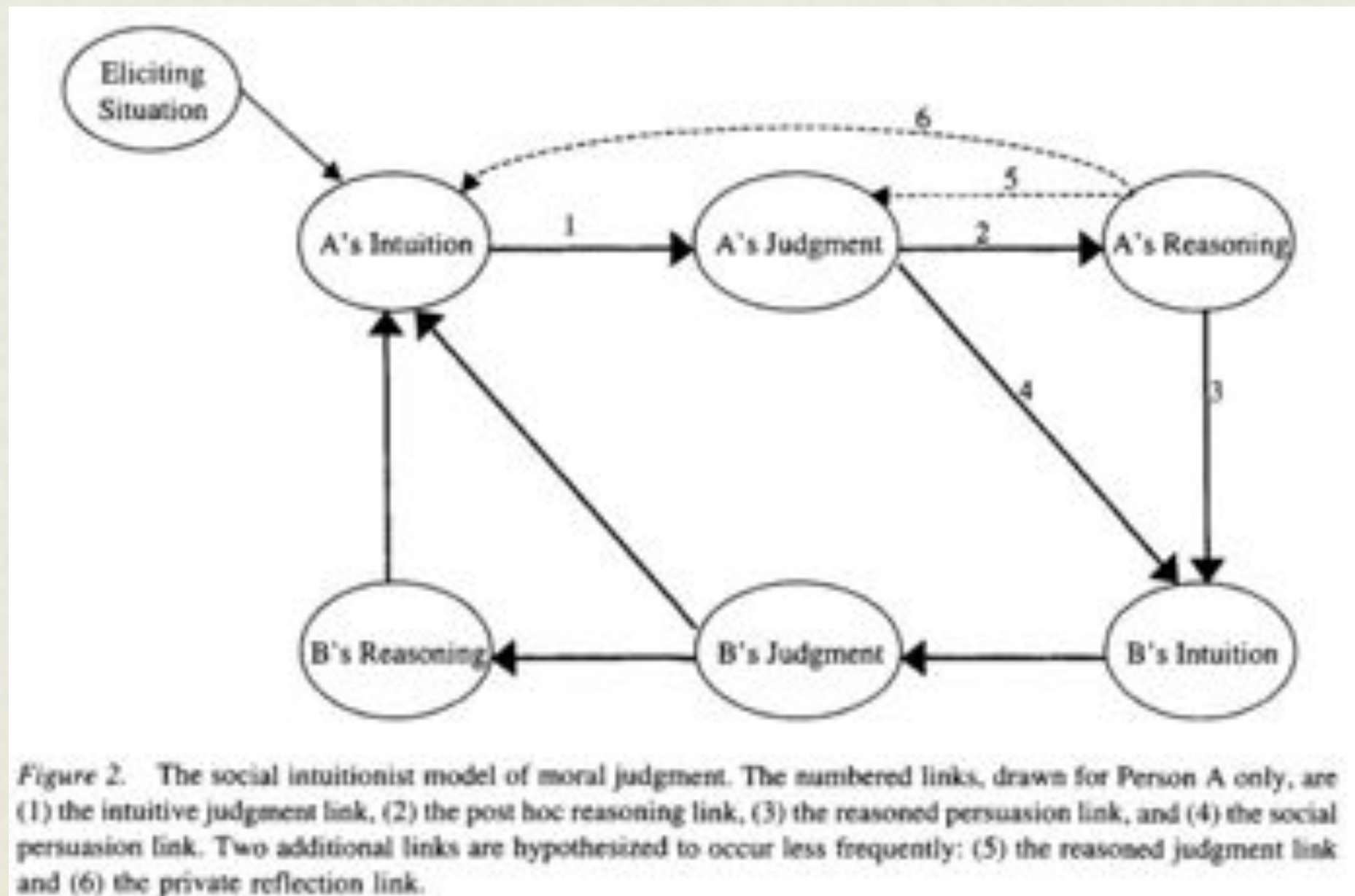
5 The reasoned judgment link

Rarely, people may reason their way to a judgment by sheer force of logic, overriding their initial intuition.



6 The private reflection link

When thinking about a situation a person may spontaneously activate a new intuition that contradicts the initial judgment (e.g. role taking).



Four reasons to doubt the causal importance of reason

1 The dual process problem:

system 1 processing is ubiquitous and understudied,

affective processing is fast and automatic,

most behaviour and judgment is automatic.

2 The motivated reasoning problem

3 The post hoc problem

4 The action problem

RESPONSE TO HAIDT BY MACKENZIE
AND KENNETT

Mackenzie and Kennett accept Haidt's claims that:

(a) Much moral judgment is:

fast, automatic, intuitive,

not directly preceded by or caused by explicit reflection.

(b) We often engage in ex post fact rationalisation of our judgments or actions.

But argue it doesn't follow that moral reasoning is mostly window dressing.

Problems with the experimental method

Responses to hypothetical dilemmas.

Not clear this can tell us much about ordinary moral reasoning and reflection:

- The scenarios are unrealistic, abstract and underspecified.

- They lack the contextual information that usually informs our judgments and decision-making.

- Their implausibility may produce “cognitive resistance”:

 - "That wouldn't happen." E.g. the Mark and Julie vignette.

- Not surprising people would be dumbfounded.

The scope of everyday moral reasoning is broader than these experimental situations allow

Examples discussed:

whether to end or stay in a marriage,

whether to give a child diagnosed with ADHD Ritalin,

whether to put an elderly parent into a nursing home or care for them oneself,

whether to accept a job offer in another city and move children away from their school and friends,

filling in for a colleague,

a young mother shopping with a small child.

Moral decision-making often has significant repercussions

So we need take into account multiple factors in relation to the situation.

This induces moral reflection,

which involves emotional, imaginative, agential and reasoning skills.

Emotion doesn't *contrast* with reasoning.

Moral reasoning may play an important distal role, even if it isn't involved in proximal judgment

Moral education:

Core moral judgments

Based on simple straightforward rules: physical harm, cheating, fairness.

We learn these as children and come to reflectively endorse them:

the child must come to see the point of the rules,

children are active reason-givers.

Moral judgments may become automatized,

but the actions are still guided by reason.

Paradigm scenarios:

a characteristic situation,

normal or appropriate responses to the situation.

E.g. turn taking and fairness.

Our emotional responses are tuned by exposure to increasingly varied and complex scenarios.

This view of moral education helps us understand:

Intelligibility:

biological basis of emotions,
embodiment of socio-cultural norms.

Opacity:

norms are played out in a variety of subtly or significantly different
scenarios.

In sum,

Mackenzie and Kennett point to two kinds of case where reasoning is likely to play a causal role in moral judgment:

when making major decisions,

in the earlier stages of moral learning.

Thus (if they are correct), reasoning plays a much more substantial role in moral judgment and decision than Haidt allows.

This suggests that our personal autonomy is stronger than it would be if Haidt was correct.

I agree with Mackenzie and Kennett,

but I think we can go further.

Mackenzie and Kennett concede that much moral judgment is

fast, automatic, intuitive,

not directly preceded by or caused by explicit reflection.

But is all or most proximal control automatic?

Saying yes concedes too much.

PROBLEMS WITH DUAL PROCESS THEORY

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But, we can have *controlled* processes that are:

(relatively) low effort, fast, (relatively) high capacity, directive (not just inhibitory).

Controlled cognition

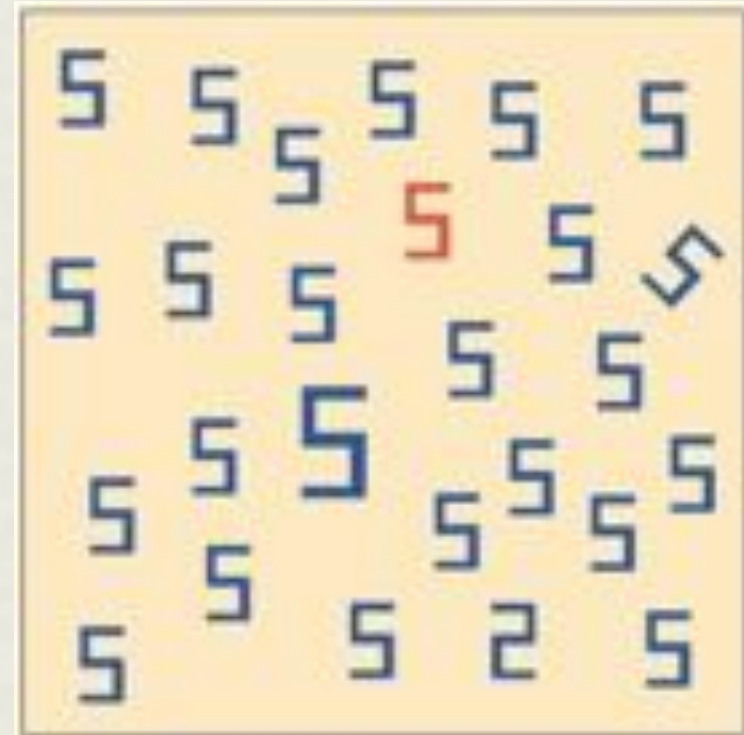
Deliberative reasoning;

extended linguaform inference.

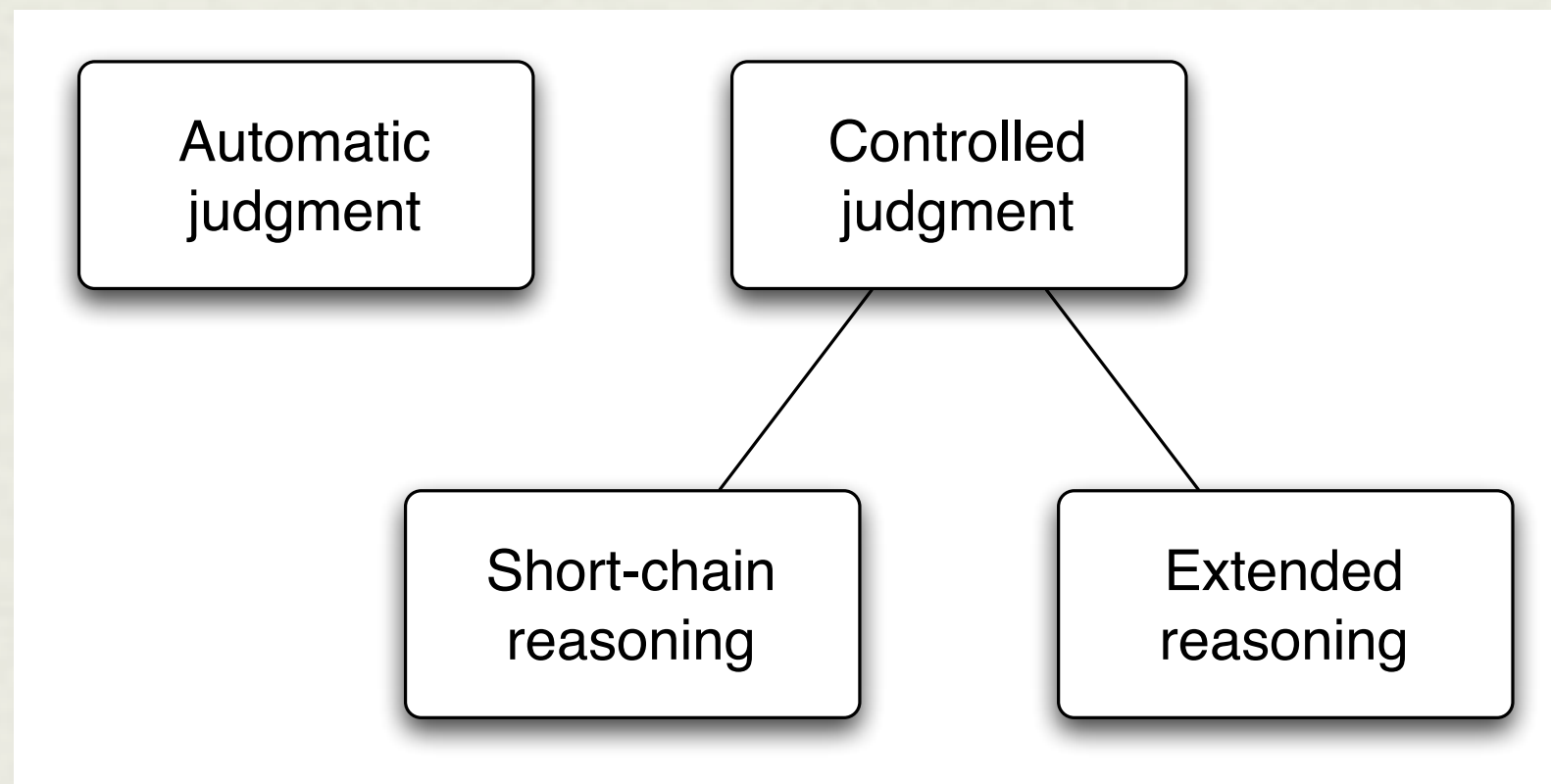
Visual search.

Mental rotation.

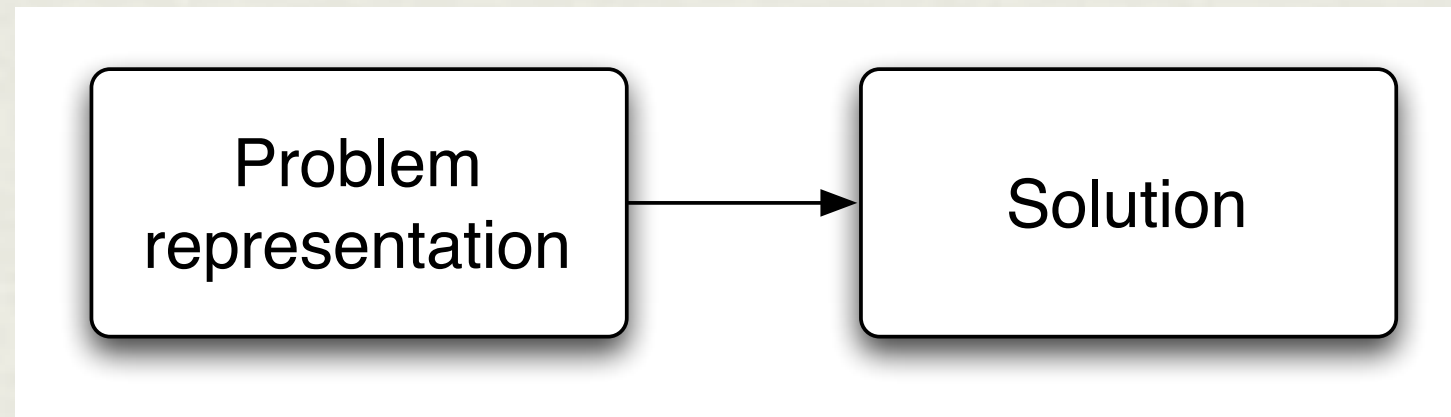
Imaginative projection.



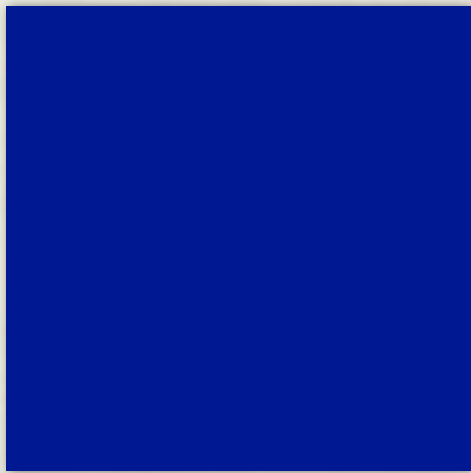
Automatic vs controlled judgment



Controlled 1-step judgment



Is the blue square bigger than the red square?

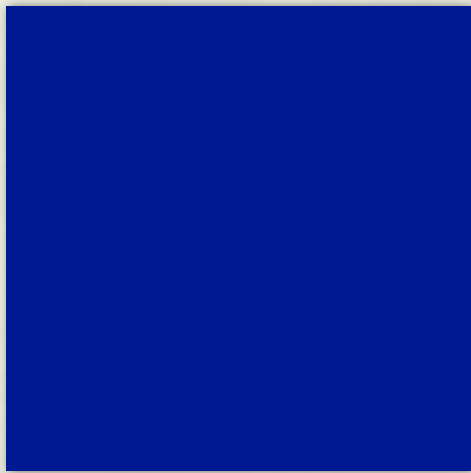


Y

or

N

Is the blue square on the left?



Y

or

N

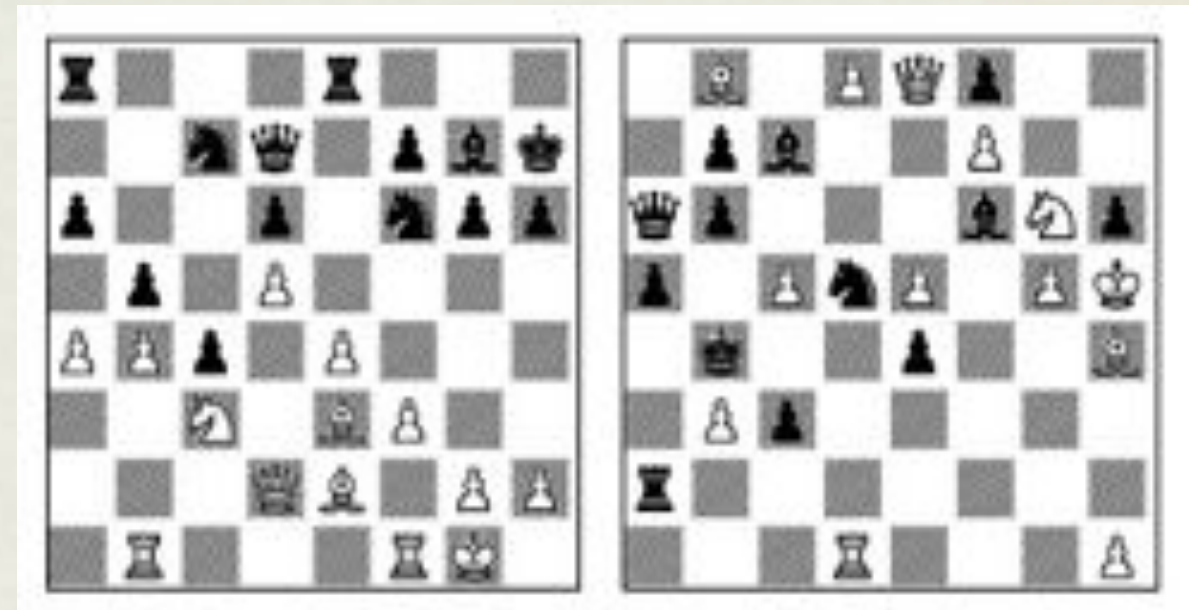
The working memory bottleneck

Miller's magic number: ± 7 items.

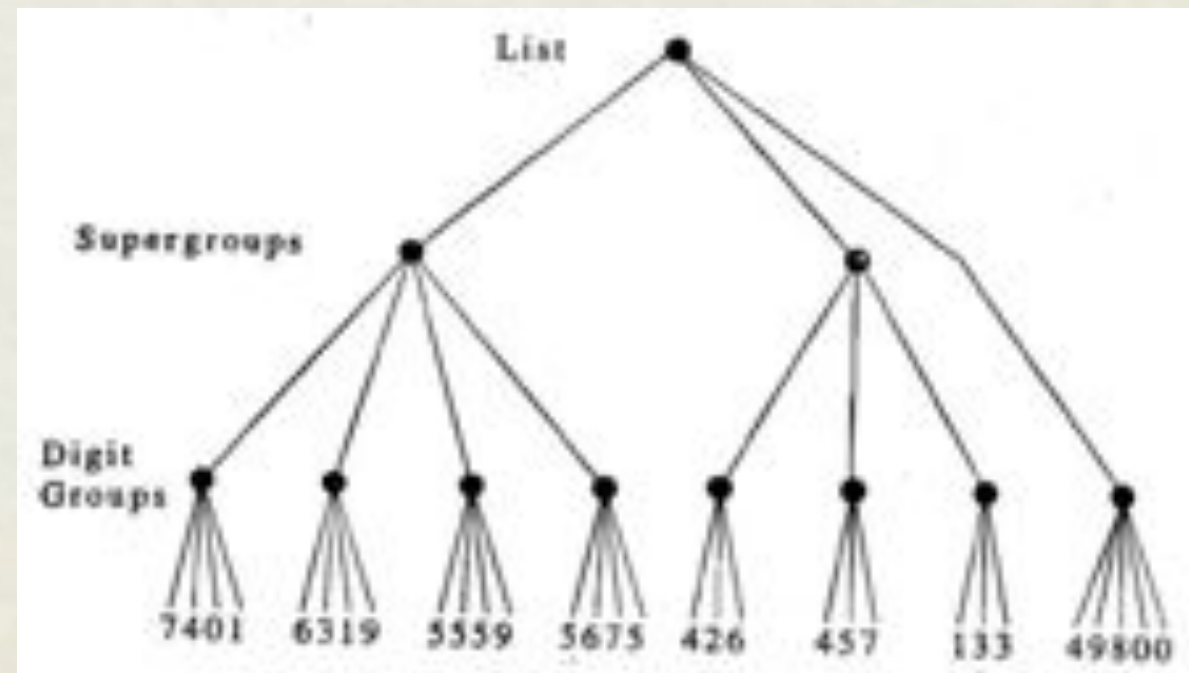
But, during reasoning, 3-4 items (Broadbent 1975).

Expanding WM capacity

Chunking.



Long-term working memory.



Situation models

Reading a story.

Having a conversation.

Expert cognitive control

Piloting an aircraft (Wickens 2002);

situation awareness:

spatial awareness (6 linked variables),

system awareness,

task awareness (ANCS).

Breakdown of situation awareness can produce "task shedding".

Better pilots are good at task management.

Rapid expert judgment

With the aid of organised long term memory and situation models experts can make rapid, sophisticated judgments.

These judgments are:

controlled, not automatic,

mediated by complex representations.

A continuum:

- (a) reasoning from first principles,
- (b) expert reasoning,
- (c) rapid expert judgment and control,
- (d) automatic response.

Key to the (a) \rightarrow (d) continuum:

increasing reliance on knowledge organization in production of solution.

Sidenote: where Dreyfus goes wrong

Dreyfus claims that expert action is nonconceptual.

“A chess Grandmaster facing a position ... experiences a compelling sense of the issue and the best move.” (Dreyfus 2005)

Experts should be virtually unimpaired in speeded conditions.

Sidenote: where Dreyfus goes wrong

According to Gobet and Simon (1996), the quality of Kasparov's play was only mildly affected against multiple opponents.

However, Lassiter (2000):

Gobet and Simon's analysis was flawed.

Analysis of a larger body of evidence showed that the performance of the chess experts progressively deteriorates with increasing time pressure

Concurrent tasks impair expert performance significantly (Gobet and Chassy 2009).

CONCLUSIONS:
EXPERTISE, MORAL JUDGMENT AND
PERSONAL AUTONOMY

Summing up

Kennett and Mackenzie left open the question of proximal control.

I've suggested that there are forms of controlled representational cognition that are well suited to proximal control.

This kind of cognition may play a role in moral judgment and decision.

Expertise may allow cognitively rich *high order* moral judgment without extended deliberation

Efficient representation of high order relations:

self, others, situation.

Implications for personal autonomy

Compared with the pessimistic view of human agency Haidt offers, humans have much stronger personal autonomy.

More broadly

The argument here illustrates the value of building closer ties between moral philosophy and cognitive research.

Moral philosophy has developed a sophisticated body of theory on agency,

but understanding of the cognitive underpinnings of human agency is rudimentary.

Closer links should be informative in both directions

Moral philosophy has a lot to teach cognitive science regarding agency.

A clearer cognitive picture may transform questions in moral philosophy.

It's true that the standard picture overemphasizes deliberative reasoning.

We need to understand the role of other kinds of cognition in moral action.