Perpetrator Disgust: The Moral Limits of Gut Feelings

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Forthcoming Oxford University Press, 2022

Introduction

> As victims line up with their backs to Bosnian-Serb soldiers on the outskirts of Srebrenica in July 1995, one low-ranking soldier, Dražen Erdemović, begins to feel ill. Later that afternoon, after Erdemović has shot hundreds of Bosniak men and boys, he suddenly runs to the bushes and vomits yellowish liquid smelling of alcohol (Drakulić 2004, 97–104).

> In the documentary film *The Act of Killing*, Anwar Congo, former gangster and mass murderer during the 1960s anti-communist purges in Indonesia, shows us around one of his old killing sites in Jakarta. On the rooftop of a dark, deserted industrial warehouse, Congo describes his murders of alleged communists. Suddenly and on screen, he begins to convulse. He gathers himself and proceeds to recount how he strangled his victims with a wire, so as to kill them in a less bloody manner. A new wave of revulsions overcomes him and he is forced to sit down. He spits on the ground, but does not throw up (Oppenheimer, dir. 2012).

Dražen Erdemović and Anwar Congo are two of countless individuals who experience a physical or emotional breakdown in the course of committing atrocities and even years later, when recalling their crimes. The perpetrators' reactions often resemble disgust responses: they feel nausea, they convulse and sometimes vomit. Some experience distress and severe discomfort; others feel dizzy and even faint. Similar phenomena can occur even years after the killings. In genocide studies, as well as in literary and cinematic representations of mass atrocity, scholars, and artists have posed the question: why? How should we understand such reactions to killing—occurring throughout time, across cultures, and among inexperienced soldiers as well as high-ranking commanders? Even

Heinrich Himmler is supposed to have vomited in 1942 as he oversaw the murder of one hundred Jews in Minsk.

This phenomenon of perpetrator disgust raises fundamental questions about human nature and human morality. Many commentators suggested that Anwar Congo's disgust indicated a sense of remorse and guilt regarding his actions. Similarly, some philosophical and psychological theories have placed high hope in the value of disgust as a form of embodied moral judgement and, as such, an important source of potential moral action. From this perspective, the distress displayed by perpetrators is proof of an instinctual human morality, a reflection of the fact that human beings are born with a natural aversion to killing.

Do these gut feelings represent a revolt of human nature against violence? Such a hopeful view is not supported by the evidence. Far from being an effective or reliable source of moral judgment, gut feelings like disgust and distress are easily manipulated and mobilized in the service of harmful, discriminatory, even genocidal policies. When perpetrators feel disgust and distress in situations of mass atrocity, they are not inspired to moral action; on the contrary, they are primarily motivated to find ways to overcome their personal discomfort. The most common result is increased violence.

The subject of perpetrator disgust has been frequently examined, if indirectly. Journalists, historians, psychologists, and social scientists have written about examples of perpetrator disgust with a focus on understanding the mindset of the perpetrator: What motivated the killers? Why did they kill? How did they become capable of killing, and by what process of transformation?[1] While

[1] As some of the principal titles in the literature suggest: B*ecoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (James Waller); *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Ervin Staub); *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Hannah Arendt); *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion*

implicitly touching on these questions, this book is centered on one particular moment in this process of brutalization—when visceral forces of distress, discomfort and revulsion overwhelm the perpetrator.

Though profoundly disturbing, the dark lens of perpetrator disgust provides a uniquely insightful perspective through which to examine and question certain popular assumptions about the moral value of emotions and gut feelings. The study of emotions, historically a neglected subject, has received significant attention in recent decades. Disgust in particular has been studied in disciplines as varied as psychology, philosophy, and the cognitive sciences. In contrast to other works on the subject, the focus of this book is not to establish a strict definition of what disgust responses *are*, nor to define the nature of emotion, affect, or gut feelings.[2] The task is rather to reflect upon what such emotions *do*. How do emotions, affect, and gut feelings influence and shape the way we perceive and understand the world? How do these emotions function and operate in specific social and political contexts? How do they influence decisions and actions? And how do individuals and groups think about and manage their emotional responses?

The task is not only to understand how the soldiers themselves interpreted their emotional responses, but also to explore the many meanings that researchers, artists, philosophers, and other commentators have ascribed to the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust. What can we learn from these various interpretations? The aim is to pinpoint and critically engage with the underlining philosophical ideas that these interpretations rest on. When scholars and commentators remark on perpetrator disgust, they often reveal or explicitly point to ideas about human nature and the

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101 and the Final Solution in Poland (Christopher Browning); *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Daniel Goldhagen).

[2] For insightful examples of such projects, see Kelly 2011; Prinz 2004; Barrett 2017.

relationship of emotions to morality. This book is therefore not just about perpetrator disgust, but also about emotions more broadly—their contextual origins, motivating force, and moral limits.

By reflecting on this broader subject through the looking glass of the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust, we observe that gut feelings can be molded in many different directions and to many different purposes, depending on an individual's specific social, political, and moral environment. The ability to feel for others enables us to take care of individuals when they are suffering but the same capacity is also used to devise ways to effectively humiliate and degrade enemies and outgroups. We therefore cannot study emotions and affective responses as abstractions, detached from their specific uses. Emotions must be studied in context.

So, while this book engages fundamental questions of human nature, morality, and emotions, it does so via specific, historically situated cases. Together with examples from fiction, documentary, and popular media, I use historical cases to discuss the various ways in which perpetrator disgust has been represented and interpreted. Since we cannot obtain objective, independent knowledge of perpetrator disgust, these cases serve as a useful springboard for further discussion. I draw on a broad variety of disciplines—philosophy, psychology, history and more—to critically scrutinize the case studies and various interpretative frameworks. Because of this interdisciplinary approach, I have prioritized accessibility and clarity in writing over scholarly jargon. For some specialized readers, this comes at a cost. Some of the material and historical case studies will be well-known to scholars in genocide and Holocaust studies. Similarly, readers specialized in the philosophy and psychology of emotions and affect will be acquainted with most of the experimental literature on disgust and empathy and may take issue with my use of perpetrator disgust to stand for a range of physical and emotional phenomena. Nonetheless, the synthesis of these various scholarly traditions permits vital insights to emerge. In addition to posing a stern test to our assumptions about human nature and morality, the lens of perpetrator disgust serves to

interrogate conclusions drawn from laboratory experiments and overly neat conceptual categories for emotions.

In recent years, the valuable efforts to mobilize scientific and philosophical research agendas toward the understanding of emotions have resulted in a peculiar glitch—emotions are increasingly being studied as abstract and even universal categories, detached from lived experience. In line with the phenomenological movement, I propose instead that studies of emotions need to engage with emotions as they unfold in a specific context. The point of such critical phenomenology, as Lisa Guenther terms it, is to reflect on the transcendental structures that make the lived experience of consciousness possible and meaningful in the first place (Guenther 2020). From this perspective, human consciousness occurs and is embedded in concrete circumstances of the world. Any scholarly endeavor seeking to understand the basic structures that constitute its meaning and coherence must begin its inquiry from this starting point.

For Hannah Arendt, such a starting point led to a more true and authentic form of phenomenology than her academic mentors Heidegger and Husserl pursued. The foundation of their phenomenology had been built on the notion of an isolated self. Arendt regarded this as a grave mistake and reproached Heidegger for effectively withdrawing to an "existential solipsism" (Loidolt 2018a, 63). Instead, Arendt believed that phenomenology should be grounded in the fact that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt 2018, 7). This conviction served as the foundation for Arendt's commitment to case studies—from her doctoral dissertation on Rahel Varnhagen to her essays in *Men in Dark Times* and, most famously, her reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann.

As the last decades in the field of microhistory have shown, the attention to detail, context, and specificity provides an opportunity to review and revise commonplace modes of explanation. In philosophy of emotions, scholars are also zooming in on particular emotions: anxiety (Kurth 2018),

contempt (Bell 2013), disgust (Kelly 2011), anger (Nussbaum 2019), and rage (Cherry 2021). In the slipstream of these developments, this study narrows its focus even further, centering on a very specific kind of emotional phenomenon through which we are able to explore and test the limits of more general theoretical issues—from the nature of human beings and the character of emotions to the limits of morality. But in its commitment to the particular and its reliance on personal testimonies and narratives, such an approach introduces its own set of problems, particularly when dealing with perpetrators of mass atrocity.

1. Why study perpetrators?

Before we begin to explore the questions that have been raised, I want to reflect on some pertinent ethical and methodological concerns that are prompted by the study of perpetrators. To begin with, why dedicate time on dissecting the emotional states of perpetrators? Is it not more appropriate to study the lives and deaths of victims? And what drives studies such as these—sensationalist fascination or perhaps self-righteousness? Motives aside, can we avoid being desensitized by daily exposure to examples of extreme violence that obscure and exclude the victims themselves?

James Dawes condenses these questions into what he calls the paradox of representation: "*We are morally obligated to represent trauma, but we are also morally obligated not to*" (Dawes 2013, xii, emphasis by author). Writing about Japanese soldiers who committed war crimes in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), Dawes proceeds from the assumption common to human rights scholars and practitioners, that it is always good to bear witness—the paradigm of "either speak out or be silent, either resist or be complicit" (Dawes 2013, 9). In the course of his thinking on the subject, Dawes came to question this assumption. In the telling of stories, victims may be re-traumatized while the broader audience may end up feeling desensitized or even repelled by the subject. Similarly, in her seminal essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag urges us to

confront and struggle with such tensions. The real danger, in her view, lies in ignoring or denying them:

> One can feel obliged to look at photographs that record great cruelties and crimes. One should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show. Not all reactions to these pictures are under the supervision of reason and conscience. Most depictions of tormented, mutilated bodies do arouse a prurient interest…All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic. But images of the repulsive can also allure. Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity. It is also, for many, the wish to see something gruesome. Calling such wishes "morbid" suggests a rare aberration, but the attraction to such sites is not rare, and is a perennial source of inner torment (Sontag 2003, 95).

This paradox of horror, as Noël Carroll calls it, is that people voluntarily expose themselves to feelings of distress and repulsion (Carroll 1990, chap. 4). The paradox is as old as philosophical record. Socrates tells the story of Leontius who experiences conflicting emotions of disgust and fascination when he witnesses the corpses of publicly executed criminals.[3] In the viewing of horror

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[3] The story is part of Plato's argument for the tripartite soul—the idea that the human body (as well as the republic) consists of reason ("logos"), emotion/spirit ("thumos") and appetites ("epithumia"). The story serves to demonstrate that emotions and appetites are two distinct mechanisms, and it points out that cultivated emotions like disgust and anger can be in conflict with the more primitive and spontaneous appetites, i.e. that "anger sometimes wages war against the appetites as one thing against another" (Liebert 2013, 185). See also Liebert 2013 for an interesting discussion of the divergent interpretations of Leontius' disgust among Classics scholars.

movies, people are curious about the ghastly nature of the monster. The categorical violation of moral and social principles both disgusts and fascinates (Carroll 1990, chap. 4). For the same reason, perpetrators of mass atrocities are subjects of intense interest. Often, they are also conceived as a type of monster—a monolithic and incomprehensible evil. The early bibliographies of Adolf Eichmann—and their horror-movie like book covers—are a prime example: *Eichmann: The Savage Truth* (1960); *Eichmann: Man of Slaughter* (1960); and *Minister of Death: The Adolf Eichmann Story* (1961).

By contrast, Hannah Arendt's ground-breaking analysis of Eichmann as an example of "the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*" is a model example of how to avoid a repellent sort of fascination with the perpetrator (Arendt 1994, 252). Later studies have shown that Eichmann was much more anti-Semitic and had more executive responsibility than Arendt presumed, but the novelty and importance of Arendt's analysis is unquestionable (Gerlach 2001; Cesarani 2004; Stangneth 2014). A chief insight—and the starting point of her contribution on the subject—was that Eichmann was not alien to human comprehension, not a wild savage or the slaughtering monster of contemporaneous biography. In her words, "the problem with Eichmann was that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifying normal" (Arendt 1994, 276). The portrayal of Eichmann as simultaneously boring, normal, and evil was an antidote to the paradigm of the Nazi perpetrator as mad, perverted, and inhuman. This was, in short, an argument about the scope of human nature.

In 1945, Hannah Arendt declared that the problem of evil would become "the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe" (Arendt 1945). Arendt herself dedicated most of her intellectual life to understanding the problem of the Holocaust and its perpetrators, but very few other philosophers followed her example. In the aftermath of Second World War, moral philosophy in the academy instead tended towards even more abstraction and theory. With the notable

exceptions of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, scholarly attention focused on problems internal to moral philosophy and not the moral evils of the world. At the end of the century, some philosophers—not many, but more than a few—at last began to explore the consequences of mass atrocities on moral life and philosophy. In these valuable studies, philosophers often act as moderators who help clarify debates and concepts in various fields (e.g., Holocaust or genocide studies, transitional justice, studies of war and war crimes).[4]

However, without sufficient familiarity with the facts and context of an issue, philosophical analysis can be grossly misapplied. To take one such unfortunate example, Thomas Brudholm points to a debate following the 2004 hostage crisis and killing of school children in Beslan. Two Danish philosophers had given their analysis of the act by pointing to Arendt's concept of the banality of evil. They claimed that the perpetrators had no evil intentions. This caused a justified public outcry. With little reference to fact, the philosophers had speculated about the perpetrators' consciousness, motives, and emotions (Brudholm 2008b, 13). Theory preceded fact.

Instead of such conceptual recycling, philosophers must take seriously the complexity of empirical cases. The outset of philosophical analysis should proceed from the cases themselves and

[4] Susan Neiman traces how the history of modern philosophy is intimately connected with the problem of evil (Neiman 2002); others take on the task of defining and categorizing contemporary evils (Card 2002; Vetlesen 2005; Card 2010; Harrosh and Crisp 2019) and understanding how the systematic use of war rape affects the victim's sense of subjectivity and her relationship to the broader community (Card 2002, chap. 6; 2003; Schott 2003, chap. 3; 2011). Perpetrator groups receive attention in the study of so-called Nazi ethics (Fritze and Bialas 2014), while others focus on the role of emotions in mass atrocity (Brudholm and Lang 2018) or specifically on the aftermath of atrocity with special attention to victims' rights to moral repair (Walker 2006) or to resist calls for forgiveness (Brudholm 2008a). Meta-philosophical discussions explore how ethics as a discipline becomes transformed in the wake of atrocity and if we can learn from moral catastrophe (Garrard and Scarre 2003; Roth 2005a; Petropoulos and Roth 2005; Roth 2005b; Geddes, Roth, and Simon 2009; Agamben 2000; Lara 2001; 2007).

not from an existing theoretical framework. This is a challenge to the philosopher's inclination to universalize and categorize but strengthens analysis by forcing us to reckon with thorny details of real-life cases. It is not enough to simply apply ethics. Ethical principles must be challenged by the realities around us (Glover 2000, 4–6). When we confront mass atrocities, as Arne Grøn puts it, we are "in a deep sense … left without orientation as to what it is to be human" (Grøn 2009, 40). The appropriate philosophical response to mass atrocities may require a complete re-evaluation of our normative concept of a human being and its capabilities.

Arendt's philosophical analysis of Eichmann addressed these questions without sensationalism. But some also believe she was too cold and distanced in her analysis, especially in her portrayal of the victims. As Dawes warns, constant exposure to detailed descriptions of mass atrocities also produces another unwanted emotional response—more precisely, a lack of one. The scholar of mass atrocity certainly habituates to the depictions and narratives of mass violence. This numbness or "moral myopia", as Dawes puts it, may be the only emotional alternative to the sensationalism of mass atrocities (Dawes 2013, 10). Susan Sontag even argues that such emotional numbness is part of our moral adulthood:

> Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia" (Sontag 2003, 114).

Nonetheless, atrocities continue to shock us though we *are* well aware of them. A visit to the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau is likely to trigger a strong response. But such shock and horror

are only the starting point of our analysis. It is the task of this book to demonstrate that the study of perpetrator disgust is uniquely revealing on the nature and functioning of human emotions.

2. The problem of perpetrator testimonies

In addition to thorny ethical dilemmas, the study of perpetrators prompts serious questions concerning the reliability of perpetrator accounts. This problem is especially pertinent for the topic of this book, which focuses not only on what perpetrators do or say but on what they feel or, more precisely, on what they claim to have felt.

Perpetrator disgust is an involuntary phenomenon. Like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, who feels a strong repugnance when he discovers his sock wet with the blood of his victim, the perpetrator is suddenly overcome by a physical reaction. In *Crime and Punishment,* we follow Raskolnikov's downfall with complete and authoritative access to his tormented self. Even so, the reader is left to guess at the precise cause of his disgust. In the case studies of this book, unlike with Dostoevsky, there is no direct access to the inner lives of the subjects. We cannot divine the thoughts and feelings that accompany their physical reactions. Indeed, these may often be unclear to the perpetrators themselves; it is this ambiguity that makes possible the wide range of different interpretations of perpetrator disgust among perpetrators, scholars, and commentators alike. As we will see, a key factor for understanding different presentations of the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust is the context in which testimonies take place.

Most perpetrator testimonies come from post-war situations. A typical source is a courtroom statement with the accused on trial. Another is an interview with a journalist many years after the crime. In both instances we have reason to doubt the credibility and truthfulness of the testimony. The post-war context makes it very likely that the perpetrator would wish to paint a particular, often more humane picture of himself, diminishing his own role and responsibility, playing up the stress

of the moment and his own ambivalence, sometimes with an apologetic attitude.[5] Given the passage of time, it is often difficult to establish the true nature of events, or to corroborate the perpetrator's account. This is a general problem for perpetrator studies as such, but it is a particular problem for the study of perpetrator disgust.

The account of Heinrich Himmler's vomiting at the shootings of Jews in Minsk in 1942, for example, comes from Karl Wolff, Himmler's sub-commander, who told the story with vivid detail on at least two occasions. In Wolff's first account, which he published at the time of the Eichmann trial, Heinrich Himmler crouches as he witnesses Einsatzgruppe B fire their first volley of shots. He staggers, turns green, and covers his face with his hands. Brain matter has splattered on him. He cleans his face with quivering hands and vomits. Karl Wolff calls out to him, "Come over to the wagon. It's better we leave before the next are dragged to the ditch." Himmler nods and follows. Later in Minsk, Himmler drinks several cognacs. This is uncharacteristic, Wolff observes. Himmler tended to have only one or two glasses of wine a day. He remarks to Wolff that, in spite of everything, he found it right that they had witnessed the shootings. Those who decide over life and death must also know what death looks like and what it is that they command their troops to do (Wolff 1961).

Wolff later told the same story to journalist Susan McConachy[6] but with altered details: Himmler went green, swayed and almost fainted, but he did not actually vomit. Wolff claims that this was the first time Himmler saw "the human result of his orders" and that he had up to that moment never seen a man killed. This is why the more experienced Wolff tries to talk Himmler out

[5] We find a striking lack of contrition in Joshua Oppenheimer's films *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), which portray the culture of impunity in Indonesia. We return to these cases in chapter 3 and 4. Also see Payne 2008 for a review of perpetrator testimonies and public confessions.

[6] In *The World at War,* a British documentary series chronicling events of the Second World War (Elstein 1973).

of watching the shootings (Holmes 2008, Chapter 10). In the first version of the story, however, Wolff claimed that he was forced to watch the executions by Himmler (Wolff 1961). According to Wolff, Himmler's original errand had been to hold a speech for the non-commissioned officers in Einsatzgruppe B. It was therefore a coincidence that Himmler and Wolff happened to be present when Einsatzgruppe B captures and executes a group of Jews, accused of being spies.

Historian Peter Padfield suspects that Wolff's account of Himmler vomiting is pure fabrication. Padfield demonstrates that Himmler's presence was no mere coincidence; Himmler had planned to inspect the mass shootings. Furthermore, witnesses at Karl Wolff's trial testified that Himmler stayed and saw another round of killings and then held a speech to the patrol about "the sacred necessity of their task – hard as it was – which according to other participants strengthened the men in their resolve to do their duty" (Padfield 2001, 342–43).

We can only guess at Wolff's motivations for telling his accounts of Himmler's disgust. Out of loyalty, he may have intended to paint a more humane picture of his former commander or wished to convey that even the chief ideologue, and not only the regular soldiers of the SS, felt sick in the course of mass executions. The interesting point for our purposes is that genocide scholars often refer to the story as established fact, despite the doubtful source of the episode. Indeed, Himmler's alleged sickness is attributed a great significance. Immediately following this episode, Himmler is supposed to have ordered a "more humane" way of carrying out the killings, which led to the use of gas chambers, and it has been suggested that Himmler's uneasiness may be associated with a form of moral conflict (Staub 1992, 146–47). Philosopher Jonathan Glover, for example, interprets Himmler's disgust as an instance of a "breakthrough of the human responses" (Glover 2000, 345). We will dive deeper into these moral interpretations of the disgust in chapter 1; the larger point to keep in mind is that accounts of perpetrator disgust can be a useful story for the perpetrator.

For this reason, because of their source and context, we must be critical recipients of perpetrator testimonies, especially in cases where the perpetrator provides his own interpretation of his bodily reaction. Such an interpretation may give us a better understanding of his reflections upon the episode, but these reflections are frequently inconsistent, altered with time and context in which they take place. Perpetrator testimonies are in particular sensitive toward this kind of alteration, but the problem of confabulation is a common one when we try to understand emotional responses, especially when they have a visceral and automatic character. Interpretations of our own emotional responses constitute an after-the-fact assessment that is prone to error; we do not always know what actually elicited our emotional response (Robinson 2005, 79–81).

3. The problem of conceptualizing feelings

To pursue the "real meaning" of the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust is a futile task. A more fruitful inquiry is to explore the different interpretations of the phenomenon, which illuminate how both perpetrators and scholars understand the connection (or the absence of connection) between bodily reactions and a moral understanding. These debates reveal not only fundamental disagreements about what disgust and distress responses mean for human morality, but also questions about how to conceptualize and understand such bodily responses: Are they feelings, affect, or full-blown emotions? To what degree, if any, are we in control of our own emotions? And to what extent should we understand emotions as a sign of conscious, even moral judgements?

For a long time, scholars regarded emotions with suspicion. Considered unreliable and beyond our control—an external, dominating force that we passively receive—emotions were seen in opposition to the agent's willpower and ability to make rational decisions.[7] Especially in the last

[7] Although this was the dominant trend, many classical philosophers have analyzed human emotions. See, for example, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and sentimentalist philosophers like Adam Smith and David Hume.

thirty years, this conception of emotions has been increasingly challenged. In the view of many philosophers and psychologists today, emotions are no longer considered irrational or beyond our control. They have, in philosophical terms, intentionality: they do not appear out of nowhere, they are directed at something in the world. When I feel angry because someone stole my wallet, my racing heart and reddening face are directed at something or rather someone, the person who stole my wallet, or at myself for not taking better care of my possessions. Feelings can thus be intelligible and rational.

Some philosophers argue that proponents of such *cognitivist views of emotions*[8] have done their job too well. By identifying emotions with cognitive states (thoughts, judgments, beliefs, attitudes), they introduced an understanding of emotions that was coherent with traditional philosophical terminology but as a consequence neglected one of the essential features of emotions: that feelings and affect sometimes do overwhelm us and take control of our being. Instead, so-called *feeling theorists* argue that involuntary bodily changes are the essential characteristic of emotions.[9] Without a change in the physiological state there would be no emotion, and hence no cognitive apprehension of what is felt. In this view, emotions primarily consist of affective and bodily experiences. Any cognitive evaluation of our bodily and emotional response is secondary to this experience of feeling. If I did not feel my heart racing and my face reddening, I would not have experienced anger when my wallet was stolen.

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[8] Philosophers with a cognitivist approach to the emotions include Martha Nussbaum, Robert C. Solomon, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev and Peter Goldie.

[9] Key voices in this tradition include William James and Carl Lange, and more recently Jesse Prinz and Jenefer Robinson. Also referred to as non-cognitivism.

Few scholars today advocate pure versions of cognitive or feeling theories and instead embrace hybrid theories that combine the two.[10] New theories even reject the dichotomy between feeling and cognition and emphasize that feelings or affect, and the whole body as such, are always involved in the way we experience and perceive the world (Sullivan 2015; Colombetti 2017; Barrett 2017). These approaches also challenge the idea that we can divide emotions into neatly separated categories like "anger", "shame", or "love". The meta-studies of neuropsychologist Lisa Barrett and her colleagues—founders of the constructivist school in emotion theory—refute the search for distinct fingerprints of the so-called basic emotions in the brain, body, and facial expressions (Barrett 2017). The focus on endless variations within emotional categories shows that the anger I feel when someone steals my wallet on the train is not the same kind of anger that I experience when I irretrievably lose my keys. The differences are evident in terms of my facial and bodily expressions, my inner bodily feelings, the neurological movements in my brain and my general intentional stance. In the latter case, my anger quickly turns into self-blame and general frustration. In the former, my anger is directed at the unknown pickpocket.

Despite advances made by emotions scholars during the last fifty years, the central and key question of how to define an emotion still remains heavily disputed and controversial (Leys 2017).[11] The phenomenon of perpetrator disgust presents us with similar problems of conceptualization and definition. The soldiers have no control over the bodily changes they experience. Moreover,

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[10] For an overview of the debate see Prinz 2004; Robinson 2005; Scarantino and de Sousa 2018.

[11] In the contemporary Anglo-Saxon tradition, "feelings" are understood as merely one component of the larger concept of an emotion, which also encompasses cognitive and other physiological components. As Thomas Dixon argues, this conceptualization is primarily a modern phenomenon stemming from the 19th century. It causes significant confusion because most languages treat terms like emotions and feelings—but also affects, sentiments and passions—as synonyms (Dixon 2012).

because of the swiftness and involuntarily character of the response, they are often not consciously aware of what, exactly, elicits their disgust and distress.

For pragmatic reasons, I have chosen to apply the term “disgust” as a common designator for the range of bodily stress responses (dizziness, crying, nausea, vomiting, trembling, fainting and the like) that a perpetrator experiences while committing a crime, in the immediate aftermath, or many years after the fact. But it is indeed an open question whether an individual case of perpetrator disgust should be understood as an emotion in terms of the scholarly definitions given above, and if “disgust” is the most fitting label to apply.[12] Similarly, I use the terms bodily *responses* and bodily *reactions* interchangeably.[13] Despite their different etymologies, response and reaction signal both (i) intentionality, as in a feeling or a thought in response to a situation or event, and (ii) something automatic, as in a reaction caused by a specific stimuli, for example an allergic reaction to a specific food. In sum, my use of the term perpetrator disgust is a thin and descriptive one. Instead of an excessive focus on definitional disagreements, this choice allows us to focus our attention on the various cases and the many contested interpretations of this complex phenomenon.

4. Interpretive Frameworks

This book presents and evaluates four frameworks for how to consider visceral, aversive gut feelings like those we encounter in the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust. Chapter 1 outlines what

[12] In earlier writing, I have referred to the phenomenon as *perpetrator abhorrence* (Munch-Jurisic 2014). I use the term “perpetrator” because the primary cases considered come from situations of genocide or war crimes. I return to discuss this choice in Chapter 4.

[13] As well as physiological and visceral responses/reactions. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, response is a variation of the Old French ”respons” or Latin ”responsum” which means ”something offered in return”. Reaction is from the Medieval Latin ”react-” which means ”done again”.

I call *the moral view of perpetrator disgust*. A range of dominant interpretations in genocide studies, philosophy, and psychology have argued that emotional responses like disgust and distress contain moral potential because they provide the agent with an embodied form of moral perception that can (and should) guide individual action. In genocide studies we find nativist interpretations that view the perpetrator's disgust response as a sign of an innate human instinct against killing and habituation interpretations that see disgust as shaped by the social and moral environment of the agent. Both accounts maintain the conviction that the disgust response contains moral potential, a seed for prosocial action. A similar view is expressed in literature on the moral value of disgust and empathic distress—the feeling of discomfort that we feel when witnessing someone in distress. Scholars have argued that such emotional reactions are prosocial, necessary building blocks for human morality. When soldiers do not acknowledge the significance of such emotions, the original prosocial potential is not realized, but distorted.

Chapter 2 presents a vigorous challenge to the moral view of perpetrator disgust, articulated by genocide scholars who reject the notion that moral significance can be attributed to perpetrator disgust. In this *non-moral* view *of perpetrator disgust,* the phenomenon reflects a merely aesthetic revulsion. In the same vein, a growing number of skeptical voices in philosophy and psychology argue that feelings of disgust and distress are non-moral, irrelevant to, and inherently distortive of moral judgements. While not denying the role of empathic distress or empathy in ethical and prosocial behavior, or that disgust responses can reflect moral convictions, the emphasis is that these emotions contain no pre-determined moral motivation; they are themselves morally neutral. From this conception of disgust, empathy, and other so-called moral emotions, the shift of focus is to the *uses* of these emotions in specific contexts. When torturers expose their victims to degrading and humiliating treatment, they do not mute their capacity for empathy. On the contrary, they employ their ability to empathize to devise excruciating suffering in their victims.

Rejecting the false dichotomy of viewing perpetrator disgust as either moral or non-moral, chapter 3 presents an alternative account that I call *the destructive view of perpetrator disgust.* To account for the full range of this complex phenomenon—which includes instances of aesthetic disgust as well as disgust that is accompanied by explicit expressions of guilt and recognition of moral wrongdoing—we need to divorce basic, ontological questions of perpetrator disgust from consequential questions of its motivational force. When perpetrators feel disgust in situations of mass atrocity—even when they experience a visceral form of moral conflict—they are not inspired to moral action; on the contrary, because of their social, moral, and political context, the perpetrators tend to understand their distress as a weakness, an emotional obstacle to be overcome. Rather than an impediment to murder, then, the occurrence and management of perpetrator disgust becomes a crucial element in shaping a genocidal mentality. Perpetrator disgust is, in this sense, primarily a morally destructive emotion.

Building on insights from the destructive view of emotions and latest scientific research, chapter 4 seeks to establish the contours of the *moral limits of gut feelings*. With a focus to the importance of context in shaping the possibilities for motivated behavior, I sum up the argument that emotions, gut feelings, and even rudimentary affect are not mere instinctive reflexes. They are inherently social, moral, and political in a twofold sense: they are the product of our social, moral and political upbringing, and they continuously shape the way we act and think as social, moral, and political beings. In chapter 4, I argue for such *a contextual view of emotions* and affective states. Drawing on recent advancements in the scientific and philosophical study of emotions—most notably the constructivist view of emotions—I highlight two dimensions of relevant context that bear on emotional affect: *The external context* refers to the concrete situation in which an emotion is experienced, but also to the broader environment of an agent that over time shapes their affective, physiological responses; *The internal context* refers to the hermeneutic equipment and epistemic

resources agents have available to interpret and make sense of their emotional states—both in the actual moment of emotion perception (in the form of biases and scrips which are often implicit and unconscious) and after the fact (in terms of the explicit and intentional reflection). Our emotional responses are, in short, biological templates onto which particular values are imprinted. Gut feelings speak primarily to the social facts of our time and place.