Perpetrator Disgust
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Perpetrator Disgust
An Enquiry into the Relationship between Body, Emotion and Morality

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Preface

During a museum visit in my early adolescence, at the end of an impressive exhibition of mammoths, saber tooth tigers and king cobras at the Zoological Museum of Copenhagen, there was a sign pointing to a narrow dark box with a thick black curtain. “The most dangerous animal in the world,” it read. Opening the curtain and stepping inside the dim box, I found my own image reflected in the mirror. The episode has stuck with me and is the subject of this study.

I first became aware of the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust through Hannah Arendt’s account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who allegedly felt sick and fainted when he witnessed the executions of Jews on the Eastern front. Later, as an intern at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY), I encountered the phenomenon again. An insider witness—a young Serbian soldier testifying in the case of Milutinovic et al.¹—stated that he had an emotional and physical breakdown during a massacre of civilians in a Kosovar village.

The subject of my master’s thesis was focused on the way in which feelings of disgust in the wake of genocide and atrocity can foster moral imperatives like “Never again!”, which may then be perverted to promote and justify new rounds of violence. In the course of my research, I was intrigued by the complex and morally ambivalent force of the disgust response, especially in the cases of perpetrators who felt sick during military operations. Though I was reluctant to spend 3 years of my life poring over the details of mass atrocity, perpetrator disgust seemed to offer a unique and powerful lens with which to examine certain assumptions about human nature and morality, and I applied for a PhD grant that has led to this dissertation.

Though my motivation to study the subject of this dissertation stretches a long way back, the task would never have been completed without

¹ The case is now referred to as Sainovic et al, since Milan Milutinovic was acquitted in 2009 (ICTY, 2014).
the many people who have offered me essential support and encouragement along the way.

It was not until I met Robin May Schott, in my second year as an undergraduate philosophy student at the University of Copenhagen, that I realized that there was room for serious study of evil and mass atrocity within the academic discipline of philosophy. Moreover, as a woman, Robin was a powerful role model at a time when no woman had ever obtained a tenured position at our philosophy department (today there is two, and a rising number of female PhDs and post docs). Throughout my graduate education, Robin has continued to push me to pose better questions, and I am very grateful for her support and mentoring.

Sociologist Erik Markussen—who sadly past away in 2007—and historian Mark Levene sparked my interest in the field of genocide studies and the concept of a genocidal mentality. Philosopher Smail Rapic encouraged me to stay within the field of philosophy and combine moral philosophical analysis with genocide studies. The international educational organization Humanity in Action (HIA) and the Holocaust and Genocide department of the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) helped me broaden and further my understanding of genocide studies. Mikkel Thorup and Carsten Fogh Nielsen helped me put together the actual PhD application.

During my year as a visiting PhD student at the Philosophy Section at the University of Chicago, I was deeply impressed with the rigorous approach to any aspect of academic philosophy and the dismantling of the notorious analytical/continental distinction. I am especially thankful for Professor Dan Brudney and Professor Martha Nussbaum, who took time to review and provide feedback on my work. Their thinking shaped the future direction of my project in fundamental ways. My year at the University of Chicago would not have been possible, if not for the generous financial support I received from the Augustinus Foundation, Oticon Foundation, Danish Society for Women and Knud Højgaards Foundation.
Back in Denmark, I have often felt extremely thankful for fruitful intellectual exchanges and the friendly and welcoming environment at the Institute for Cross Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen, especially the 7th floor colleagues from Minority Studies and Cross Cultural Studies. During a seminar on “The Uproar of Emotions: Studying Genocide after the Emotional Turn”, DIIS (February, 2013), feedback from Professors Dan Zahavi and David Konstan opened my eyes to conceptual frameworks that became central to the analytical work in the dissertation. Later, Konstan also provided comments on a draft of the dissertation. His feedback and humor were tremendously encouraging at the last stages of writing. At the same seminar and at several other occasions, I was also very grateful for the thoughtful feedback from Professors Arne Johan Vetlesen and Margaret Walker, and psychologist Johannes Lang. Professor Jeffrie Murphy also deserves a special mention for the vital expertise provided at crucial points in the writing process. His pointed feedback was extremely encouraging, and his ideas helped shape and define my own position.

I would also like to thank historian Therkel Stræde, director Joshua Oppenheimer, journalists Joshua Phillips and John Conroy for sharing their great knowledge and first-hand experience in the research and documentation of war crimes, genocide and torture. Without the rich and foundational work and analysis that such historians, journalists and documentarians provide, the analysis in this dissertation would not have been possible.

Many thanks also to Germanist Alice Christensen for help with translating Kant quotes, and Professor Ben Laurence and PhD fellow David Holiday for their thought-provoking feedback during my presentation at University of Chicago’s Contemporary Philosophy Workshop. I also want to thank my students of the courses “Ethics after Auschwitz” and the “Politics of Disgust: From Aversion to Dehumanization” for their inspiring responses to the course material.
Last but not least, I would like to thank a group of people who supported the project in the most essential ways. With a meticulous eye for detail and gaps in argumentation, Gry Ardal Printzlau provided many challenging critiques and observations. Throughout the whole process, my co-advisor Søren Gosvig Olesen also patiently reviewed draft upon draft and challenged me to stay on track in my reasoning. My primary advisor, Thomas Brudholm has been my solid rock throughout the whole process. Thomas has been extremely generous in his encouragement and support, and his expertise in genocide studies and philosophy of emotions has contributed enormously to all aspects of the dissertation. My PhD assessment committee provided extensive commentary and their feedback has had a significant impact on my work.

Finally and most importantly, I have been blessed with a husband who had the patience to go through draft after draft with an eye for language. His nonnegotiable demand for clarity in structure and argument has sharpened my own thinking on the subject, and his persistent support for the project has been immeasurable. Moreover, he and our two-year-old son have provided a much-needed oasis from the subject of this dissertation. I also thank my friends and the rest of my family for their love and support, especially my mother who provided essential practical help on many occasions.
Introduction

When Heinrich Himmler witnessed the shooting of 100 Jews in Minsk in 1942, he allegedly broke down and vomited. How should we understand this reaction on the part of a leading Nazi and architect of the Holocaust? Was it a response to the sheer gruesomeness of the scene? Or perhaps a revolt of human nature against the act? Himmler’s case may be the most notorious instance of this phenomenon, but there are many similar examples to be found among perpetrators of war crimes.

As the targeted victims line up with their backs to Bosnian-Serb soldiers on the outskirts of Srebrenica in July 1995, one low-ranking soldier, Drazen Erdemovic, begins to feel ill. Later that afternoon, after Erdemovic has shot hundreds of Bosniak men and boys, he suddenly runs to the bushes and vomits. Nothing comes out except yellowish liquid smelling of alcohol (Drakulić 2004, 97–104).

In the documentary The Act of Killing, Anwar Congo, former gangster and mass killer during the anti-communist purges in Indonesia in the mid 1960s, shows us around a former killing site in Jakarta. On the rooftop of a dark, deserted industrial warehouse, Congo describes his murder 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 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 2012).

Himmler, Erdemovic and Congo are but three of countless individuals who experience a physical or emotional breakdown while committing atrocities and years later, when recalling their crimes. The ambition of this dissertation is to deliver a systematic and comprehensive examination of this phenomenon that I call “perpetrator disgust”. While many psychologists, historians and war journalists have reported and written about examples of
perpetrator disgust, these works have primarily attempted to explain the perpetrator’s mindset. By contrast, instead of focusing on the motivation of the killers (why did they kill?) or their transformation (how did they become capable of killing?), these pages will consider various interpretations of the phenomenon to explore the philosophical questions they give rise to: What significance, if any, can we attribute to a bodily response? Do the symptoms of perpetrator disgust—nausea, dizziness, fainting, vomiting and crying—indicate some subliminal awareness of the moral wrong of the act? How firm is the connection between feelings and moral judgment, and, more broadly, can we settle such a question conclusively? The aspiration is therefore that the conclusions of this study both will be of interest to scholars of mass crimes (specifically perpetrator studies) and scholars interested in the emotions and their relationship to morality.

Why study perpetrators?

Before I begin to explore these questions, I want to consider couple additional, preliminary ones. Why dedicate so much time on dissecting the emotional states of perpetrators? Is it not more appropriate to study the lives and deaths of victims?

In exploring the ethical issues in studying and writing about perpetrators, James Dawes calls upon the paradox that “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 began with the assumption common to human rights scholars and

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As some of the principal titles in the literature suggest: Becoming 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 101 and the Final Solution in Poland (Christopher Browning); Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (Daniel Goldhagen).
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). However, in the course of his project, he came to question this assumption. In the telling of stories, victims may be re-traumatized, while another audience may end up feeling desensitized or even repelled by the subject.

Dawes also worries about the motivations behind perpetrator studies—are they rooted in “the call for responsibility to the other, the narcissism of moral righteousness, or the writer’s desire for sensational material?” (Dawes 2013, 10). Anyone working with or representing perpetrator testimony has, or ought to have, searched their souls for an answer to this question. For a study such as this, which has for its basis an extensive study of the gruesome details of mass violence, the question is all the more insistent. As Susan Sontag has put it:

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).

The 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. In the viewing of horror 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 the 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).

Hannah Arendt’s opposing and groundbreaking analysis of Eichmann as an example of “the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil” has been my anchor and model for keeping the project free of any fascinating interest (Arendt 1994, 252). Later studies have shown that Eichmann was much more anti-Semitic and had a more responsible role than Arendt presumed (Gerlach 2001; Cesarani 2004; Stangneth 2014), but the novelty and importance of Arendt’s analysis was the insight that Eichmann was not alien to human comprehension. 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. It was, in short, an argument about the scope of human nature.

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.
Arendt wrote about Eichmann without sensationalism. In these pages, I aim to write about perpetrator disgust in the same manner. Nonetheless, the constant exposure to detailed descriptions of mass atrocities also produces another unwanted emotional response, or more precisely, a lack of emotional response. The scholar of mass atrocity certainly habituates to the depictions and narratives of mass violence. This emotional 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 polemically 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).

However, Sontag fails to recognize that atrocities continue to shock us although we are well aware that people commit unspeakable atrocities. A visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau will likely trigger a strong response in most of us, but few will feel shock throughout the whole visit. What is important is that we do not let the shock and horror solely define the study of perpetrators. As Dostoevsky allegedly said, “Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him.” My hope is that a more thorough understanding of the emotional responses of perpetrators can teach us a valuable lesson about the complex relationship between bodily responses, emotions and human morality.
The problem of perpetrator testimonies

The practice of studying perpetrators also poses another serious problem, concerning the reliability of perpetrator accounts. Perpetrator disgust is an involuntary phenomenon. Like Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, who feels a strong repugnance when he discovers his sock wet with the old woman’s blood, the perpetrator is suddenly overcome by his body’s 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 dissertation, unlike Dostoevsky, we have no access to the inner lives of our subjects. We cannot divine the thoughts and feelings that accompany their physical reactions. Indeed, these may often be unclear to the perpetrators themselves. As I will demonstrate, this discrepancy allows a wide range of different interpretations of perpetrator disgust. This is essentially problematic for establishing the nature of the phenomenon, and becomes complicated further if we consider the context of perpetrator testimonies.

Most perpetrator testimonies come from post-war situations. A typical source is a courtroom statement with the accused on trial. Another is a journalist interview 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. Given the passage of time, it is often difficult to establish the true course 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.

4 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. Also, see Payne 2008 for a review of perpetrator testimonies and public confessions.
Let’s review one example of this problem. The account of Heinrich Himmler’s vomiting at the shootings of Jews in Minsk in 1942 comes from Karl Wolff, Himmler’s sub-commander, who told the story on at least two occasions. He first made it public in his article “Eichmanns Chef Heinrich Himmler”, published in the German magazine NEUE Illustrierte, at the time of the Eichmann trial (April 1961). In this account, Heinrich Himmler is witnessing Einsatzgruppe B readying to shoot around 100 Jews. At the volley of shots, Himmler crouches. He staggers, turns green, and covers his face with his hands. A piece of brain has squirited 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 they command their troops to do (Wolff 1961).

Wolff later told the same story to journalist Susan McConachy,5 but some of the details were altered: 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 of watching the shootings (Holmes 2008, Chapter 10). In the NEUE Illustrierte version of the story, Wolff explains 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 around when Einsatzgruppe B captures and executes a group of “Jewish spies”. But

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5 In The World at War, a British documentary series chronicling events of World War II, produced by Thames Television from 1969 to 1973.
Himmler had planned to inspect the mass shootings, historian Peter Padfield demonstrates. Moreover, Padfield suspects that Wolff’s story about Himmler vomiting is pure fabrication. According to witnesses at Karl Wolff’s trial, 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, 342–343).

Despite the doubtful source, scholars often refer to the story as common knowledge, suggesting that Himmler’s sickness may be associated with a form of moral condemnation (Staub 1992, 146–147). Following this episode, Himmler is supposed to have ordered a “more humane” way of doing the killings, which led to the use of gas chambers (MacNair 2001, 276). According to Padfield, however, Himmler had, in all likelihood, already decided on the gassing method at the time of the visit to Minsk (Padfield 2001, 343). We can only guess at Wolff’s motivations for telling this vivid and detailed account of Himmler’s disgust—out of loyalty, he may have intended to paint a more human 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—but the larger point 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 a case 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 that is all. This is a general problem when we try to understand emotional responses, especially when they have a visceral and automatic character. Interpretations of our own emotional response are always an after-the-fact-assessment that is prone to error; we can’t always know what actually elicited the emotional response (Robinson 2005, 79–81). The “real” nature of perpetrator disgust is thus beyond our reach to intuit, and my discussion of the phenomenon will therefore necessarily rely on different interpretations of
the phenomenon itself. The task is to examine how both perpetrators and scholars understand the connection (or the absence of connection) between a bodily reaction and a moral impulse. In exploring the plausibility of various interpretations, the dissertation stretches over a wide range of scholarly disciplines, including genocide studies, history, psychology, and philosophy. Informed by an interdisciplinary outlook, this study aims to provide a comprehensive account of perpetrator disgust and apply the insights gained to the emerging philosophical fields that engage with the study of atrocity and the study of the emotions.

**Philosophy and the study of atrocity**

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 World War II, moral philosophy instead tended towards even more abstraction and theory. With the notable exception of philosophers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, scholarly attention focused on problems internal to moral philosophy and not the moral problems 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.⁶ Susan Neiman traced how the history of modern philosophy is intimately connected with the problem of evil (Neiman 2002); others took on the task of defining and categorizing contemporary evils (Card 2002; Vetlesen 2005; Card 2010) and understanding how the systematic use of war rape affects the victim’s sense of subjectivity and her

⁶ Simultaneously, many philosophers and scholars looked for answers in Arendt’s work to the point that some started talking about an “Arendt-industry”.

[Page 17]
relationship to the broader community (Card 2002, chap. 6; Card 2003; Schott 2003, chap. 3; Schott 2011). Perpetrator groups have received attention in the study of so-called Nazi ethics (Fritze and Bialas 2014), while others have focused on the aftermath of atrocities with special attention to victims’ rights to moral repair (Walker 2006) or to resist calls for forgiveness (Brudholm 2008a). Meta-philosophical discussions have explored how ethics as a discipline becomes transformed in the wake of atrocities and if we can learn from catastrophes (Garrard and Scarre 2003; Roth 2005a; Petropoulos and Roth 2005; Roth 2005b; Geddes, Roth, and Simon 2009; Agamben 2000; Lara 2001; Lara 2007).

In these valuable studies, philosophers often act as moderators who help clarify debates and concepts in the relevant field (e.g. Holocaust or genocide studies, transitional justice, studies of war and war crimes). 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 hostage crisis and killing of school children in Beslan, in 2004. 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 this sort of conceptual recycling, philosophers must take seriously the complexity of empirical cases. The outset of a philosophical analysis should proceed from the cases themselves and 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.

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—
humans submitting other humans to cruel and degrading treatment—may require a complete reevaluation of our normative concept of a human being and its capabilities. Philosophy’s fundamental categories of humanity and morality may need to be re-invented (Grøn 2009, 40). It is not enough to simply apply ethics. As Jonathan Glover puts it, ethical principles must be challenged by the realities around us (Glover 2000, 4–6). Instead of beginning with the definition of a concept—as Vetlesen does in *Evil and Human Agency*, in which he defines a concept of evil before applying it to particular cases—or an overall theory of human moral psychology in the vein of Glover’s *Humanity: a moral history of the twentieth century*, our discussion here begins with the messy details of the cases themselves. My goal is to see how these cases challenge existing assumptions about emotions and morality in philosophy and psychology.

**Philosophy and the study of emotion**

I have just articulated a bottom-up approach that tries to avoid the pitfalls of proceeding from a pre-established theory, or concept. This approach is unconventional not only for philosophy but also for emotion research. Typically, philosophers and other scholars who study emotions focus on a specific emotion, for example shame or love⁷ or on the general concept of emotion.⁸ But perpetrator disgust is primarily marked by a set of specific physiological responses. In some cases these may not even constitute an emotion. When I refer to the phenomenon as “perpetrator disgust”, my definition is therefore thin and descriptive. It refers to the physiological response (dizziness, crying, nausea, vomiting, trembling, fainting and the

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⁷ For example, *Shame and Necessity* (Bernard Williams, 1993) and *Love’s Knowledge* (Martha Nussbaum, 1992).

like) that a perpetrator experiences while committing a crime, in the immediate aftermath, or many years later. This involuntary, physiological response is the core element that cuts across different cases. Throughout the dissertation the point of dispute is how to interpret these responses. Though our focus is on one concept, perpetrator disgust, there are many different conceptions of what perpetrator disgust signifies. The “concept” of perpetrator disgust merely describes the core elements in the phenomenon, whereas the different “conceptions” are specific interpretations of the elements contained within. From here, we can distinguish between the phenomenon and its interpretations.

By asking how we should interpret this physiological response, I enter into an old, but also a very much contemporary philosophical and psychological discussion on the nature of emotions: What causes an emotional response? To what degree, if any, are we in control of our own emotional responses? And to what extent should emotions be seen as cognitive evaluations?

For a long time philosophers regarded emotions with suspicion. They were identified as unreliable and beyond our control, perceived as an external, dominating force that we passively receive. Emotions were also seen in contradiction to the agent’s willpower and ability to make rational decisions. Especially in the last 20-30 years this conception of emotions has been challenged by many philosophers and psychologists. In the view of many today, emotions are no longer considered irrational or completely outside our control. They are about something—they have in philosophical terms an intentional structure—and they are a way we perceive and evaluate our experiences in the world. When I feel angry because someone stole my wallet,

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9 I use the term “perpetrator” because the primary pool of cases I consider come from situations of genocide or war crimes. For pragmatic reasons, I employ the term “disgust” as a collective designation for the wide range of responses that the phenomenon encompasses.
10 I borrow the terminology of concept and conception from Rainer Forst and John Rawls (Forst 2012, 17; Rawls 1971, 5).
11 Although this was the dominant trend many classical philosophers have, however, dedicated much analytical analysis to the emotions. See for example, Aristotle in his Rhetoric, and sentimentalist philosophers like Adam Smith and David Hume.
my racing heart and reddening face is directed at something or rather someone, the person who stole my wallet, or at myself for not taking better care.¹²

Some argue that proponents of this cognitivist view of emotions 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 they neglected one of the essential features of emotions (and the reason why they were excluded from the philosophical scene in the first place) namely that emotional states sometimes do overwhelm and take control of our being. Instead so-called feeling theorists argue that involuntarily bodily changes are essential to the emotions.¹³ 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 in affective and bodily experiences. Any cognitive evaluation of our bodily and emotional response is always 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.

Many cognitivists have conceded that the feeling may be necessary for an emotional experience, but that it is merely one component in the larger concept of an emotion. Figure 1 below provides a simple representation of these various components of emotions.

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¹² Philosophers with a cognitivist approach to the emotions include Martha Nussbaum, Robert C. Solomon, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev and Peter Goldie.

¹³ Key voices in this tradition include William James and Carl Lange, and more recently Jesse Prinz and Jenefer Robinson.
While feeling theories point to the physiological components (what they refer to as feelings) as primary for emotions, cognitivists point to the mental components. Moreover, behavioral theories argue that emotions should primarily be conceived through their motivational force. In this view, emotions are primarily dispositions to specific behavior (Ryle 1949, chap. 4; Skinner 1953, 162; Prinz 2004, 7). Today many advocates of both cognitive and feeling theories have moderated their approach in various fashions, so that most contemporary theories recognize that emotions encompass all three of the above components. Disagreements prevail over the appropriate weight to be attributed to these different elements of emotion.  

The meta-discussions on the nature of emotions are especially interesting when applied to perpetrator disgust because the soldiers have no control over the bodily changes they experience (nausea, vomiting and sometimes fainting). Moreover, because of the swiftness and involuntarily character of the response, the soldiers are often not consciously aware of

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14 For an overview of the debate see de Sousa 2014 and the first chapters of Prinz 2004 and Robinson 2005.
what, exactly, elicits their disgust. This raises several analytical questions. First and most pressing, is perpetrator disgust a passive phenomenon that the agent receives unwillingly, or is it is an emotional response that the agent somewhat controls? In many cases of perpetrator disgust, it is unclear if the bodily responses have an intentional object or if they are merely reactions caused by a stimuli. In such cases it would therefore be another question if the bodily response is a component of an emotion, or of it should be understood in strictly physiological terms. Moreover, if perpetrator disgust should be conceived as an emotion, a further question concerns its motivational force.

At this point I leave these questions open, and instead I will throughout the dissertation use the terms bodily responses and bodily reactions interchangeably (as well as physiological and visceral responses/reactions) to characterize the bodily changes in perpetrator disgust. Despite their different etymologies, both of these terms contain the same duality that is crucial to our discussion of perpetrator disgust. They can be understood as both (i) an intentional reaction to an object, as in an a feeling or a thought in response to a situation or event, and as (ii) an automatic reaction that is caused by a specific stimuli, for example trembling due to cold, or an allergic reaction to a specific food.

Structure

The dissertation is divided into two major sections. The first section is dedicated to mapping out the broad and varied landscape of the different interpretations of perpetrator disgust. I present a range of different cases from historical record, journalist interviews and academic analyses, as well as documentary films and narrative fiction. The primary analytical exercise consists in analyzing and comparing the various interpretations that scholars

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15 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".
have attributed to the cases under examination. Some argue that perpetrator
disgust is sign of a deep-seated moral instinct, others that it has nothing to do
with a moral assessment.

Section two places the discussion of perpetrator disgust against a
broader theoretical framework. In three chapters, I compare the phenomenon
of perpetrator disgust to similar emotional responses and discuss what role
such emotional responses have for moral perception and moral judgment.

Like perpetrator disgust, both disgust and vicarious distress—i.e. the
discomfort we feel when witnessing someone in pain—are characterized
by a specific, involuntary bodily response and it is not always clear what
triggers them, if they have a clear intentionality, and what motivation they
foster. This has prompted a wide range of attempts to understand the nature
and normative potential of these responses in both psychology and
philosophy. Consequently my discussion in section two expands from a
descriptive comparison of cases and interpretations of such emotional
responses to a consideration of the normative functions and roles that these
emotional responses may possess.

I start out by arguing that disgust responses can be compared to
stop signs, because the feeling compels us to stop and pay caution. But the
feeling merely points towards a transgression of a social or moral principle. It
has, in other words, merely a heuristic function for moral judgment. If we
want to make sure that a disgust response represents a moral or social value
that we are committed to, we must critically evaluate our response and the
principles that it stems from and reflects. I find support for this argument in
an unexpected place, namely in Immanuel Kant’s conception of the
relationship between disgust responses and moral judgments. A quick reading
of Kant suggests that he does not recognize the moral value of emotions, but
there are several crucial places in his authorship where Kant acknowledges
that feelings like disgust and respect play a crucial role for our moral
perception. Not because such feelings constitute moral judgment, but because
they make us feel the constraints of the moral law in an embodied way. This is
already well-known and recognized when it comes to the feeling of respect for the moral law. My focus is to show that the same can be said about disgust. My Kantian inspired model of disgust as stop sign leaves us with a rationalist conception of moral emotions as products of moral judgment, and with a normative command that we should always scrutinize whether our emotional responses are in line with our committed moral judgment. In the following two chapters I consider objections to this model.

First, I consider the possibility that the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust is an instance of vicarious distress, and whether this confirms the idea that perpetrator disgust is a deep-seated moral instinct. Among historical and contemporary theories of vicarious distress I find evidence that our capacity to feel vicarious distress is an innate and instinctual reflex that is essential for our development of prosocial behavior. But the feeling vicarious distress does not necessarily motivate us to help the victim in suffering. It can also make us shun and abuse. Like disgust, the normative function of vicarious distress is shaped by both our upbringing and socialization, and continuously by the social, cultural, moral and political frameworks that we reside in.

Second, I question the cognitivist and rationalist conception of emotion that the stop-sign model advocates. Here I discuss what kind of intentionality—if any—is present in involuntary bodily responses like perpetrator disgust and whether such bodily responses represent a moral judgment. I embrace a moderate cognitivist model of emotions as cognitive causes. In this model involuntary bodily responses like disgust and distress constitute a central part of an emotion, but they merely convey moral value and do not constitute it. I argue that cognitive processes (both conscious and unconscious) constitute the moral value that the feeling conveys and not the other way around.

In brief, this account incorporates insights from both contemporary neosentimentalist and cognitivist theories about emotions.

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16 See for example Reath 1989; Sytsma 1993; Goy 2007.
Feelings may express our moral judgments, but we should distinguish between two types. Involuntary bodily responses like the ones we see in perpetrator disgust primarily convey an agnostic moral judgment (which may even be unconscious). But a committed moral judgment is the result of an agent’s conscious reflection and deliberation. Because gut feelings like perpetrator disgust, disgust and vicarious distress may distort our moral perception, we should not entrust our moral judgment entirely to them. In my final discussion I relate this normative conclusion back to the cases of perpetrator disgust and face an important challenge: Is my trust in the power of reflection and reasoning obscured by the fact that many perpetrators did stop and reflect on the meaning of their disgust responses, but that this reflection equipped them with reasons to overcome their disgust and continue killing?
Section I

Outlining the Landscape:
Interpretations of Perpetrator Disgust
Introduction to section one

Perpetrator disgust encompasses a broad spectrum of cases. In nearly every discussion of a case featuring the phenomenon, a simultaneous interpretation of its significance and meaning is offered. In this section, I examine the various interpretations put forth by scholars.

Often we find starkly divergent interpretations of the same cases. The interpretations disagree on the credibility of the source or on the factual matters of the phenomenon, but the most vehement disagreements surround the moral significance of the phenomenon. Generally speaking, we can divide scholarly interpretations of perpetrator disgust into three camps:

- **Nativist interpretations** understand perpetrator disgust as the manifestation of a deep-seated moral impulse, a natural morality that rebels against the act committed or witnessed.

- **Non-moral interpretations** understand perpetrator disgust as mere visceral disgust in response to the sights and smells that accompany mass atrocities, without a moral component.

- **Habituation interpretations** understand perpetrator disgust as a reflection of moral conflict in the perpetrator, but reject the nativist suggestion of an instinctual morality.

In the following chapters, I will discuss each of these three camps in turn, evaluating the different interpretations they offer, their arguments and assumptions. The cases of perpetrator disgust that I consider include high-ranking officers as well as infantrymen. I also examine what happens as soldiers overcome their perpetrator disgust.
Nativist Interpretations

From animal pity to self-pity

During his trial in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann argued that he had felt physically ill as he inspected the methods that the SS were developing for the killing of Jews. This alleged sickness has been hotly debated among historians.

Eichmann was the man behind the logistics of the Holocaust. His primary task was to organize deportations to death and concentration camps. He usually sat in his office in Berlin and coordinated train schedules. In late 1941 or early 1942, however, Eichmann’s superior Heinrich Müller sent him out to inspect an experimental method of mass killing in Chelmno, Poland. Naked Jews were packed into the back of a mobile gas truck, the doors were closed shut, and then the exhaust fumes were fed to the back of the truck, killing the passengers. Eichmann recalled the episode thus:

I cannot tell [how many Jews entered], I hardly looked, I could not; I could not; I had had enough. The shrieking, and ... I was much too upset, and so on, as I later told [Heinrich] Müller when I reported to him; he did not get much profit out of my report. I then drove along after the van, and then I saw the most horrible sight I had thus far seen in my life. The truck was making for an open, the doors were opened, and the corpses were thrown out, as though they were still alive, so smooth were their limbs... After that time I could sit for hours with my driver without exchanging a word with him. There I got enough. I was finished. I only remembered that a physician in white overalls told me to look
through a hole into the truck while they were still in it. I refused to do that. I could not. I had to disappear (Arendt, 88).

Shortly afterwards, Eichmann is sent to inspect mass shootings in Minsk, Russia. He witnesses young soldiers shooting at young women and children, and the brains of a small child squirt on his leather jacket (Cesarani 2006, 100). He sees a dead woman in a ditch with her arms turned backwards in an awkward position and says of the episode, “that was quite enough for me... my knees went weak and off I went” (Arendt, 88).

Eichmann’s post-war testimony is notorious for being extremely voluminous—he wrote and tape-recorded his own memoirs on numerous occasions—and unreliable (Gerlach 2001; Wojak 2001). Historian Christopher Browning, for example, warns us that “the Eichmann testimonies, both before and after capture, are consciously calculated attempts at self-representation, self-justification, and legal defense” (Browning 2003, 8–9). He believes Eichmann’s description of his personal reactions in Chelmno are “clearly self-serving and calculated”, but he acknowledges that the extraordinarily vivid details of the killing operation may be true (Browning 2003, 11, 18). Historian David Cesarani largely agrees but notes that most details of Eichmann’s inspection visits emerge from his own tape-recorded memoirs and not the trial17:

When speaking in freedom in Argentina in 1957, he described his tour of the killing sites in 1941 without any expression of pleasure or satisfaction. So there is reason to believe his statements in captivity where he was uncomfortable with the policy of ‘physical annihilation’, and not only the messy business of shooting. Eichmann initially balked at the prospect of industrialized mass murder using poison gas, too (Cesarani 2006, 115).

17 Republished in America in 2006 as Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crime and Trial of a Desk Murderer.
Eichmann told his tape recorder that in Auschwitz, “They laughed, naturally, when my nerves broke down and I couldn’t keep my military dignity” (Cesarani 2006, 115). In this instance, Eichmann seems to have little reason to invent such an embarrassing situation. Nonetheless, Cesarani argues that Eichmann’s physical discomfort was probably not a result of moral horror. Eichmann considered himself weak and found it humiliating that he could not bear to watch the killings. When Christian Wirth—one of the men behind the so-called euthanasia program—tells him about the experimental procedures for killing Jews with gas from Russian submarines, Eichmann claims to have responded strongly:

For me, too, this was monstrous. I am not as tough as to be able to endure something of this sort without any reaction... If today I am shown a gaping wound, I can’t possibly look at it. I am that type of person, so that very often I was told that I couldn’t become a doctor. I still remember how I pictured the thing to myself, and then I became physically weak, as though I had lived through some great agitation. Such things happen to everybody, and it left behind a certain inner trembling (Arendt 1994, 87).

Eichmann attempted to convince his superior Heinrich Müller that he was not tough enough for these inspections. He explains that “he had never been a soldier, never been to the front, had never seen action, that he could not sleep and had nightmares” (Arendt 1994, 89). Eichmann may have worried that his weakness would cost him his position within the Nazi hierarchy, as the Jewish question was now to be solved by annihilation. Until then, his primary task had been to solve the “Jewish problem” by emigration and political solutions. After the Wannsee conference, however, Eichmann was “relieved” to find out that he would still play a key logistical role in the execution of the new policy, the “Final Solution” (“Endlösung”). As Cesarani concludes:
Whether he liked it or not, and there are indications of ambivalence, in order to preserve his position and his office Eichmann embarked upon a career in genocide. The energy with which he set about his fresh assignment and kept at it during 1942, 1943 and 1944 gives the surest indication of whether or how quickly he mastered his ill-feelings or any scruples remaining to him (Cesarani 2006, 116).

In other words, even if Eichmann’s horror and physical abhorrence indicated a sign of a moral conflict, he quickly learned to overcome it.

In her famous analysis of Eichmann, Hannah Arendt points out that Eichmann’s perverted moral framework prevents him from understanding his emotional and physical disgust as a response of spontaneous moral abomination. As a self-described “good Kantian”, he understands emotional reactions as something that must be suppressed and prevented from exacting influence on his moral decision-making. During the trial, Eichmann argued that he had always lived his life according to Kant’s categorical imperative, but that he stopped doing so during the three years he was occupied with pursuing the Final Solution. Arendt believes that this is not necessarily the case. She argues that Eichmann instead followed a “distorted version of Kant’s categorical imperative” (Arendt 1994, 136), in which the strict concept of duty prevailed. This duty, as Eichmann understood it, was to follow the moral law of Hitler’s directives without regard to emotional feeling. As Eichmann makes clear to the Israeli Court, he—as a law-abiding citizen—would have felt worse had he not carried out the orders.18

According to Arendt, the problem for the Nazis was “to overcome not so much their conscience but the animal pity by which all men are affected in the presence of physical suffering” (Arendt 1994, 106). She also

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18 For more on Eichmann’s perversion of Kant, see Maccannell 1996 and Laustsen and Ugilt 2007.
writes of an "innate repugnance toward crime" and calls “animal pity” an “instinctive reaction” (Arendt 1994, 93). Arendt does not develop her position in detail, and one should be careful not to understand her comment as an explicit theory about morality. She does, however, carefully distinguish animal pity from conscience. This suggests that she considers this innate repugnance or “animal pity” an instinctive reaction that precedes a full-fledged moral judgment. In other words, she identifies the nature of perpetrator disgust to be pre-social. She seems to assume that this sort of response is a basic building stone in human morality, a normal human being’s reaction to crimes or gross violations of moral principles.

Arendt’s point is that the Third Reich had turned the moral codex upside down. A distorted voice of conscience told people, “Thou shalt kill”. Eichmann and the majority of the German population must have felt an inclination to act against this new “moral” law:

Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted not to murder, not to rob, not to let their neighbors go off to their doom [...] and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation (Arendt 1994, 150).

In short, they had learned to resist their emotional and instinctual sense of right and wrong. The repugnance, displaced, turned to self-pity: "What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!” (Arendt 1994, 106). In the landmark movie Shoah, we hear SS-untersturmführer Franz Suchomel make exactly such a complaint about his time as SS staff in Treblinka: “We also cried, yes... It was hell over there. We vomited and cried.” One of the commanders of Einsatzgruppe D, Albrecht Zöllner, was furious when his men were given blood sausage (black pudding) during a pause in mass shootings. How could
the cook be so insensitive to serve a dish that would remind them of the horrors they were in the midst of? It made it impossible for them to “switch off” and was “one hell of a disgrace”. Zöllner expresses no discomfort with the murderous assignment. His pity is not with the victims, but with his men. They were the victims forced to do this “filthy work” (Angrick 2008, 90–91).

Himmler addressed the same issue in his infamous Poznan address to SS officers in 1943, where he inveighed against every one of those 80 million Germans who each have their “decent Jew”, who say, “all the others are swine, but here is a first-class Jew”. There was no room for such sentiments in the Third Reich, and we see this most clearly (and extremely) in the execution of the Holocaust. Himmler explicitly addresses the perpetrator disgust that his audience, the SS officers, have experienced:

Most of you will know what it means when 100 bodies lie together, when 500 are there or when there are 1000. And . . . to have seen this through and—with the exception of human weakness—to have remained decent, has made us hard and is a page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned (Himmler 1943).

Himmler recognizes that the heavy and atrocious duties of the soldiers provoke a strong emotional reaction. At the same time, he emphasizes that it is possible to overcome this, to harden oneself, and still keep one’s moral integrity. As Eichmann’s self-consciousness demonstrates, Nazi ideology considered the unwillingness to participate in the shootings as a sign of human weakness. Heinrich Himmler explicitly talked about “one whose nerves are finished, one who is weak. [To him] … one can say: Good, go take your pension” (Browning 1998, 75).

Himmler’s understanding of a weak person did not just refer to someone who had a nervous breakdown. Yehoshua Robert Büchler argues that Himmler possibly had a certain Max Täubner in mind when he talked of
weakness in his Poznan address. Täubner and his men carried out the killings of thousands of Jews on the Eastern front—savagely and without orders. They boasted of their crimes by sending photographs to friends and relatives. Because of the potential for negative propaganda and embarrassment, the SS placed Täubner before trial for his excessive and sadistic behavior. Himmler had just dealt with the Täubner case a few days before he held the Poznan address, and Büchler argues that the reference to cases of “human weakness” most probably refer to Täubner—the only known case in which an SS officer was punished for killing Jews (Büchler 2003, 409–429). Not surprisingly, the main charge in the case is itself contradictory and problematic: the crime was not the brutal and sadistic behavior itself, but the fact that Täubner had acted on his own initiative. Täubner was tried for his breach of discipline and for not fulfilling his duty as a commander (Büchler, 420).

The Täubner case and the Poznan address demonstrates that Himmler and the SS recognized and talked openly about the reactions of weakness (expressed both as nervous breakdowns and sadism) that soldiers experienced. The regime attempted to delineate and cultivate a proper attitude towards these emotions.

Drawing on Arendt’s concept of animal pity, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that a necessary condition for the Holocaust was to neutralize “the impact of primeval moral drives” (Bauman 1989, 188). Unlike Arendt, who pays close attention to the transformation of Eichmann’s repugnance into self-pity, Bauman suggests that the repugnance is a glimpse of true morality shining through the ideological veil of the Nazis. In doing so, Bauman places an excessive amount of faith in the prosocial value of repugnance. He seems to believe that these instances grant us insight into the core features of morality. Bauman consents that we know very little about this animal pity, but he believes that its mere existence testifies to “the universality of human revulsion to murder, inhibition against inflicting suffering on another human being, and the urge to help those who suffer”
According to this logic, morality has an innate foundation. It is something pre-social, antecedent to the civilizing process (Bauman 1989, 24, 175).

Bauman’s principal idea is that the Holocaust was not a step back to a barbaric, primordial stage of mankind. Instead it was a particularly modern phenomenon, impossible without “modern civilization and its most central essential achievements” (Bauman 1989, 87). Since the Holocaust is a product of the civilizing process itself, Bauman reevaluates the traditional sociological assumption, most prominently put forward by Durkheim, that society civilizes us and creates our moral mindset. Bauman instead takes the Rousseauian position that civilization ruins and obscures our natural moral standards: “Morality is something society manipulates – exploits, re-directs, jams” (Bauman 1989, 183). The radical conclusion is that “the process of socialization consists in the manipulation of moral capacity – not in its production” (Bauman 1989, 178, emphasis in original). In Nazi Germany, true moral action required a resistance to socialization. The potential for such resistance lay in people’s natural and spontaneous feelings of abhorrence (Bauman 1989, 177).

From a different angle, lieutenant colonel and psychologist Dave Grossman presents an argument with the same emphasis on the moral value of abhorrence. Grossman advocates for the existence of a “powerful, innate human resistance toward killing one’s own species” (Grossman 2009, xxxi). His book On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society explains how armies over centuries have trained soldiers to overcome this resistance to kill. He lists examples of soldiers—ranging from the Napoleon era wars, First and Second World War to Vietnam—who either

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19 Arne Johan Vetlesen provides an extensive criticism of this argument and Bauman’s naïve idea that moral harmony will reign in pre-societal social interaction. As Vetlesen notes: “Such simple correlations … seldom survive empirical case studies keen on detail and attentive to the complexity of human behavior” (Vetlesen 2005, 30–32).
avoid killing in war or who feel physical repugnance or emotional abhorrence during killings.\textsuperscript{20}

An Australian sniper during World War II recalls that he felt “a queer thrill” as he shot a German observer: “It was a different feeling to that which I had when I shot my first kangaroo when I was a boy. For an instant I felt sick and faint; but the feeling soon passed” (Grossman 2009, 109). Similarly, U.S. Marine Corps veteran William Manchester recalls feeling remorse and shame after a close-range killing of a Japanese soldier in World War II. He whispers “I’m sorry” to the victim and throws up all over himself: “It was a betrayal of what I’d been taught since a child” (Grossman 2009, 87, 116).\textsuperscript{21} After a different instance of a close-range killing, a Napoleon-era British soldier explains “I reproached myself as a destroyer. An indescribable uneasiness came over me, I felt almost like a criminal” (Grossman 2009, 87). Grossman calls these episodes of perpetrator disgust “the small voice of humanity and guilt” (Grossman 2009, 225). He concludes that these examples show us that human beings have an innate and intense resistance to killing other human beings.\textsuperscript{22}

Arendt, Bauman, and Grossman provide us with a nativist interpretation of perpetrator disgust. They emphasize the pre-social and instinctive characteristics of the physical revulsion, and attribute moral qualities to it. We may qualify this general observation with a couple remarks. Arendt’s comments are brief and, in her philosophical work The Human Condition, she does not focus on instinctive morality but rather observes that the subject is born into, and dependent on, a network of social relations. Arendt’s reference to something natural or animal may be a way of

\textsuperscript{20} Historian Joanna Bourke presents a radically different thesis in An Intimate History of Killing: Face-To-Face Killing in the Twentieth Century. Against the prevalent idea that war is a terrible experience that often leaves soldiers traumatized, Bourke argues that for many soldiers war is an intense and pleasurable experience (Bourke 1999).

\textsuperscript{21} The testimonies in this paragraph originally appeared in Keegan and Holmes 1986.

\textsuperscript{22} In perhaps the most radical view of natural morality, psychologist Rahel MacNair argues that perpetrator disgust is “associated with punishing results” (MacNair 2001, 274). Although many perpetrators of mass crimes and genocide live in impunity, MacNair argues that “the natural psychological consequences of their own actions indicate that they do not escape punishment altogether for those actions” (MacNair 2001, 280).
emphasizing the involuntarily and reflex-like character of the disgust phenomenon. Grossman likewise appears to be open to the possibility that disgust is shaped in a social and cultural setting, but then he also presents the more doubtful idea that our capacity to feel disgust is somehow divine—a product of “whatever force we hold responsible for our existence” (Grossman 2009, 40). Bauman is the strongest voice for the nativist interpretation of perpetrator disgust. His theory of morality develops from the idea that human beings have an innate repugnance to cruelty.

**Humane instincts**

In *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution*, historian Christopher Browning investigates the men and actions of a single battalion. His interpretation follows the line of thought from Arendt and the other scholars who favor the nativist interpretation of perpetrator disgust. Browning focuses on the reluctance among some of the soldiers in Police Battalion 101. Some tried to avoid personal involvement in the execution of Jews while others experienced emotional and physical outbursts, such as crying, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and depression. Nonetheless, the soldiers were able to overcome these impulses and learned how to cope with and carry out the brutal and gruesome crimes against the Jewish civilian population. Browning suggests that the physical revulsion had its origin in “humane instincts”, i.e. some kind of original and human ethical stance, instincts that were in opposition to the moral codex of the Nazi regime (Browning 1998, 74). At the same time, Browning acknowledges that the men did not seem to have a conscious evaluation of the contradiction between their feelings and the crimes they ordered to perpetrate.

In Browning’s famous formulation, the men of Police Battalion 101 were “ordinary”. They did not have a history of violence that made them sadistic or prone to violent behavior, nor did they have a strong ideological
background in the Nazi movement. The men were reservists and not professionally trained military soldiers. They were generally between 37 and 42 years old, with an average age of 39 years. The vast majority was from a working class (63%) or lower middle class (35%) background. Moreover, they came from Hamburg—one of the least Nazified cities in Germany at the time (Browning 1998, 45ff). Nonetheless the men quickly adapted to the new situation, or as Browning puts it, “brutalizing was not the cause but the effect of these men’s behavior” (Browning 1998, 161). Though many of the men initially horrified at the crimes they were ordered to commit, they perpetrated them out of loyalty to the group and because they feared isolation and ostracization. Their desire to conform to the group ruled over their abhorrent impulses. They did not refer to their disgust as a moral conflict, but spoke of it in terms of a weakness (Browning 1998, 184-185).

We find the main examples of perpetrator disgust in the first “special action” (the Nazi euphemism for a killing operation) of the Police Battalion. It took place in Poland, July 13, 1942, in the village of Josefow in the district of Lublin. The men had just arrived in Poland. At 2 AM they were awoken and sent towards Josefow without any knowledge of their task. During the early morning arrival, major of the battalion Wilhelm Trapp informs the soldiers about the nature of the order—he is pale and nervous with a choking voice and tears in his eyes. Several soldiers later watch him break down and cry.

Major Wilhelm Trapp was a fifty-year-old World War I veteran and career policeman who had recently been promoted to take charge of the battalion. He had joined the Nazi party in 1932 and was therefore considered an Alter Kämpfer, but he was not deemed SS-material. His two younger police captains, both dedicated SS-men, describe him as weak, “unmilitary”, prone to interference of his officers (Browning 1998, 46).

Several soldiers report that Major Trapp later tried to avoid direct confrontation with the actual killing process. He stayed at his headquarters and did not go to the forest to witness the executions. His
distress was not kept a secret. He explicitly proclaims his disagreement with the orders. One soldier remembers that he saw the Major put a hand to his heart and say, “Oh, God, why did I have to be given these orders”. Another explains how the Major frantically ran back and forth at his headquarters, and several others vividly remember him crying, saying that his “tears really flowed” and that he “wept like a child” (Browning 1998, 58–58). One policeman remarks that the men were upset with Major Trapp’s attempts to evade the actual shootings, “We men were upset about that and said we couldn’t bear it either” (Browning 1998, 58). Nonetheless, before this summer day was over, Reserve Police Battalion 101 was responsible for killing 1500 Jews, mainly women, children and the elderly. Another 300 men of working age were deported to a concentration camp (Browning 1998, 58–59).

The shootings of the Jews took place in the forest outside of Josefow and under chaotic circumstances. Neither the men nor their commanders had any previous experience with this type of “special action”. A doctor instructed the men on how to conduct the shootings but only parts of the battalion received these instructions, and as a result the shooters were in some cases covered with blood, brains and bone splinters (Browning 1998, 65). Several of the policemen tried to evade the shootings, and most who requested to be exempted were accommodated. The men were given large amounts of alcohol and cigarette breaks to cope with the pressure. One soldier, to whom Browning gives the pseudonym Franz Kastenbaum, was part of a firing squad that operated in the woods. He explains his feelings in the moment of perpetration:

The shooting of the men was so repugnant to me that I missed the fourth man. It was simply no longer possible for me to aim accurately. I suddenly felt nauseous and ran away from the shooting site. I have expressed myself incorrectly just now. It was not that I could no longer aim accurately, rather the fourth time I intentionally missed. I then ran into the woods, vomited, and sat
down against a tree. To make sure that no one was nearby, I called loudly into the woods, because I wanted to be alone. Today I can say that my nerves were totally finished. I think that I remained alone in the woods for some two to three hours (Browning 1998, 67–68).

Kastenbaum’s statement is given during a police interrogation some twenty years after the war. During his first round of interrogations, he denied remembering anything about the shootings of Jews in Poland. Later he appeared voluntarily at the office of the Hamburg state prosecutor—who was investigating Police Battalion 101 in the early 1960s—and explained to the attorney that he came to make this statement “because he had had no peace since attempting to conceal the shooting action” (Browning 1998, 67–68). In the course of the second statement, it is important to note that Kastenbaum corrects himself and claims that he intentionally missed the fourth man. He makes sure to inform the investigators that his shooting into the air was a willful action, not just a byproduct of his physical aversion. He wants the investigators to interpret his repugnance as a moral repugnance. This emphasis may be understood as a strategy of defense—an attempt to appear more human in the eyes of the investigators.

We find several other examples of men from Police Battalion 101 who describe similar kinds of physical and emotional reactions to this initial action in Josefow. One describes his nerves as “totally finished” after he shoots his first victim, an elderly woman. Another explains that he was already “very upset from the cruel treatment of the Jews during the clearing of the town and was completely in turmoil” (Browning 1998, 66–67). While shooting his first victim, an old man, he aims too high, exposing the brain when the entire back of the skull is torn off. He then asks his general to be released: “I had become so sick that I simply couldn’t anymore” (Browning 1998, 66–67). A third man shoots the initial rounds of victims but, after a conversation with a Jewish mother, he realizes they are Germans from Kassel
and decides not to participate in the shootings: “The entire business was now so repugnant to me that I returned to my platoon leader and told him I was still sick and asked for my release” (Browning 1998, 67).

Most of those who found the shootings unbearable asked to be released early in the process, but this tendency cannot be established as a rule. Others asked to be released from the order only later. When the action was over, a sergeant describes how he saw “men emerge from the woods covered with blood and brains, morale shaken and nerves finished” (Browning 1998, 68). Back in the barracks the men were depressed, angered, embittered and shaken. They drank heavily in the evening and the action was not discussed. One witness describes the subject as taboo (Browning 1998, 69).

As was the case in the testimony of Kastenbaum, the men’s later retelling of their experience was often accompanied by an emphasis on the moral quality of their disgust. One striking example is the case of Captain Hoffmann, an ideologically schooled Nazi and an early entrant to the SS (Browning 1998, 45). Hoffman reported sick with diarrhea and severe stomach cramps before the battalion’s significant actions. At the time, well aware that his men viewed his sickness as a sign of weakness, he claimed it was the result of a dysentery vaccine. The men found him ridiculous and called him “Pimf”, a pre-teen member of the Hitler Jugend (Browning 1998, 118). Hoffman was eventually dismissed from his post as company commander because of his “deficient sense of service”, but later served again as commander on the Eastern front for White Russian auxiliaries and Caucasian volunteers—perpetrator groups renowned for their brutal and merciless behavior. Twenty years later, during police interrogations, Hoffmann changes his mode of explanation and instead describes his sickness as a form of psychological stress caused by the initial Josefow massacre. In

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23 “Witness after witness used the terms erschüttert, deprimiert, verbittert, niederschlagen, bedrückt, verstört, empört, and belastet to describe the men’s feelings that evening” (Browning 1998, 237).
the same fashion as Kastenbaum, he seeks to ascribe a moral quality to his physical reactions (Browning 1998, 117).

It remains an open question whether Hoffmann’s sickness was psychological or not. However, Browning points out that his symptoms are similar to typical psychosomatic diagnoses like the psychologically induced “irritable colon” or “adaptive colitis”. “If mass murder was giving Hoffmann stomach pains,” Browning concludes, “it was a fact that he was deeply ashamed of and sought to overcome with the best of his capacity” (Browning 1998, 120). In their post-war testimony to the police, Kastenbaum and Hoffmann use the fact of their physical revulsion to prove that their moral conscience remained intact—even though they did not behave according to it. They appeal to be regarded as human beings and not “monsters” without a sense of right and wrong.

Browning grants serious consideration to the soldiers’ physical and emotional reactions, emphasizing that:

Even twenty or twenty-five years later those who did quit shooting along the way overwhelmingly cited sheer physical revulsion against what they were doing as the prime motive but did not express any ethical or political principles behind this revulsion (Browning 1998, 74).

He adds the peculiar argument that, given the simple education of the policemen, we cannot expect them to utter “a sophisticated articulation of abstract principles”. Nonetheless, he suggests that the physical revulsion had its origin in “humane instincts”, i.e. some innate ethical stance that was in opposition to the moral codex of the Nazi regime (Browning 1998, 74). At the same time, Browning acknowledges that the men did not seem to have a conscious evaluation of the contradiction between their feelings and the crimes their regime ordered them to perpetrate. As one of the men says:
Truthfully I must say that at the time we didn’t have time to reflect about it at all. Only years later did any of us become truly conscious of what had happened then. . . . Only later did it first occur to me that it had not been right (Browning 1998, 72).

Indeed, even the men who initially felt horror at the “special action” in Josefow later came to enjoy the battalion’s later “Jew hunts” (Browning 1998, 188). Explicit, politically and ethically motivated opposition was rare among the policemen. Only a few refused to participate in the actions on such grounds, but many uttered bitterness and resentment over what they had been ordered to do. In the aftermath of the Jozefow massacre Major Trapp was faced with a serious problem—the men were demoralized (Browning 1998, 75–76). The solution to this practical problem was to include so-called Trawnikis (SS-trained inmates from POW camps) in the battalion and let them do the actual face-to-face shootings. The duties of the battalion would hereafter primarily consist of rounding up and hunting the Jews.

Despite of this development, Browning interprets the initial cases of perpetrator disgust as a result of unconscious moral conflict. Captain Hoffmann’s body rebels against the terrible deeds that his mind willed (Browning 1998, 188). In Browning’s invocation of a “humane instinct” via bodies that express moral outrage, we again find a nativist interpretation of perpetrator disgust, i.e. the idea that deep-seated moral instincts are manifested through bodily and emotional impulses.

Drawing on Primo Levi’s notion of the “grey zone” (“zona grigia”), Browning argues that the perpetrators’ disgust demonstrates that the men experienced brief instants of pity without being motivated by it. To Primo Levi the key inhabitants of the grey zone were the Jewish victims forced to participate in the destruction of their own people. The systematic terror of forcing victims into the perpetrator role was for Levi the most demonic crime of the Nazi regime (Levi 2009, 400). Levi also includes perpetrators in the grey zone, but only at the extreme boundary, as in the case of SS commander
Mushfeld in Birkenau, who briefly hesitated at the order to kill a sixteen-year-old girl who miraculously survived a gassing operation. The hesitation shows that Mushfeld was not a monolith and that he, for at least a very short moment, operated with a sense of pity. The inclusion of perpetrators in the grey zone is fundamentally problematic because of the discrepancy in the range of choices available to victims and the perpetrators. It is therefore important to emphasize that, even if perpetrator disgust in some of these cases reflects a form of pity, it rarely inspires moral action. Perpetrators like Mushfeld and the men in Police Battalion 101 who experienced perpetrator disgust cannot be said to have become victims in the same way that victims in the grey zone became perpetrators. Nonetheless, we see men like Kastenbaum and Hoffmann try to locate themselves within the grey zone by pointing to their perpetrator disgust as a sign of moral conflict. This tendency is similar to the self-pity that Eichmann exhibited.

Nativist interpretations of perpetrator disgust are beguiling and intuitively appealing. They reflect a view of human nature as essentially good, and in fact define humanity as concomitant with an aversion to harm. But they are also problematic, because they assert a straightforward connection between bodily reactions and moral condemnation. In doing so, they overlook the possibility that these bodily reactions may have no moral significance in the first place.
Non-moral Interpretations

Aesthetic disgust

In the eyes of political scientist Daniel Goldhagen, nativist interpretations of perpetrator disgust have a fundamental problem to explain the transformation process of pity turning to self-pity. Goldhagen’s alternative is to suggest that no pity existed in the first place, and that perpetrator disgust does not express a moral conflict. Examining the same examples of perpetrator disgust from Police Battalion 101, Goldhagen comes to radically different conclusions from Browning. In particular, Goldhagen vehemently rejects the idea that perpetrator disgust can signify a moral conflict. Instead he presents a non-moral interpretation of perpetrator disgust as a merely aesthetic disgust.

Goldhagen emphasizes that the men in Police Battalion 101 felt sickened by “the exploded skulls, the flying blood and bone, the sight of so many freshly killed corpses of their own making” and not because they were violating a fundamental moral principle (Goldhagen 1996, 221). He allows that the soldiers felt shaken by their experience, but argues that their physical reactions (nausea, illness and vomiting) are similar to what many soldiers experience in their first encounter on the battlefield. Arguing that none of the policemen suffered from significant emotional difficulties later on, Goldhagen cites this as proof that the bodily reactions were not evidence of a moral struggle, but of mere aesthetic disgust (Goldhagen 1996, 222; 261).

As I previously discussed, the men could refuse to participate directly in the killing operation and those who were unnerved by the killings were reassigned to other tasks without further consequence. Given this choice and the failure of most soldiers to exercise it, Goldhagen argues, it is hard to believe that the men’s physical reactions are “born from anything but the shock and gruesomeness of the moment” (Goldhagen 1996, 221–222).
Goldhagen also points to examples of perpetrator disgust in other Nazi Police Battalions in order to establish the aesthetic nature of the disgust response. One man feels sick when he sees the soldier next to him lifting children up by their hair and shooting them in the back of the head. He asks him to stop but then clarifies himself, “What I meant was that [...] he should kill them in a more decent way” (Goldhagen 1996, 401). Another explains that he requested to be relieved because his neighbor shot so ineptly—he aimed too high and caused blood and brain to spatter about. The soldier explains that he “simply could not take it any longer” (Goldhagen 1996, 280). After a killing operation in Lithuania in 1941, a soldier concludes: “I’ve done it once, never again, I won’t be able to eat for three days” (Goldhagen 1996, 192). In this direct challenge of Browning’s interpretation of perpetrator disgust as humane instincts, Goldhagen concludes:

In those infrequent instances in which any of them did wilt, or when a perpetrator objected to, or was unnerved by, the wantonness of a comrade’s manner of killing, [it should] by no means . . . be understood, without explicit evidence, to indicate principled moral disapproval of the slaughter, to indicate anything than what it almost always was, an aesthetic revulsion at the ghastliness of the scene (Goldhagen 1996, 401).

The disinclination to kill that some soldiers exhibited was not ethical. Their duty was “unpleasant” and they did not “feel up for it”, but “the decision to kill was a matter of taste and not of principle” (Goldhagen 1996, 250).

In a similar fashion, social psychologist and sociologist Harald Welzer also criticizes research on perpetrators in Holocaust and genocides studies for being misled by the hypothesis that perpetrators have to overcome existing moral barriers and ethical scruples to become killers. Such research often projects guilt onto the testimonies of perpetrators (Welzer 2004, 24; Jensen and Szejnmann 2008, 167). The researchers’ own normative values of
right and wrong shape their analysis of perpetrator disgust. They expect the perpetrators’ disgust to be rooted in a moral outrage simply because such is their own reaction to the crimes.

According to Welzer, this sort of research rests on the idea that Western civilization has developed a certain special inhibition against murder in the 20th century. In opposition, similarly to Goldhagen, Welzer argues that German culture had at the time developed specific traits that made it more prone to genocide than other European cultures. Germans did not have an inhibition against killing Jews. German culture had fostered a racist sense of superiority over so-called inferior groups that made it easy for the Nazis to implement the Holocaust. A large portion of Germans subscribed to a moral code that encouraged killing and degrading treatment instead of condemning it (Welzer 2004, 16–19):

The perpetrators not only knew what they were doing, [...] they only brought their scruples to bear on what they did in exceptional cases – indeed they were able to kill precisely because they were able to perceive themselves as persons possessing an intact moral code (Welzer 2004, 16–17).

According to this account, most Nazis saw themselves as persons of perfect integrity and did not have to overcome pre-existing moral scruples before they could kill (Welzer 2004, 23). Pointing to his own research on Nazi Police Battalion 45, Welzer identifies more disturbing examples of perpetrator disgust without a moral component.

Franz Bischoff—a member of Police Battalion 45—shot some 100 people during the first “Jew action” in Berdichev, 1941 (the Barbarossa campaign). Suddenly he became sick. Blood spattered his face, “...there was the penetrating smell of blood, and so at that point I left the ditch. I got nauseous, and after leaving the ditch I had to throw up”(Jensen and Szejnmann 2008, 177; Welzer and Christ 2005, 146). In Welzer’s
understanding, Bischoff was not disturbed by his participation in the killing actions; he was worried about what others would think of him, and so left the ditch to throw up. And Bischoff’s commander Klamm did subsequently approach Bischoff and call him a weakling (Welzer and Christ 2007, 137).

During the same operation, another soldier, Erwin Denker, also vomited during a mass shooting. He explains that it probably was a result of his sudden role as a shooter and because the smell in the ditch was so terrible. On the first occasion, his Major Gutman comes to his rescue and inquires about his health. But a few days later, the Captain of the Company, Hans Paschke, calls him a “Scheisskerl”, which translates to “bastard” or more literally “douchebag” (Welzer and Christ 2005, 139). Welzer notes that we tend to find Gutman’s caring for Denker sympathetic, but only if we block out the horror of the situation: Gutman comforts Denker because he feels uncomfortable with shooting innocent people.

Welzer maintains that it was not the suffering of the victims that made Gutman feel bad, but the fact that it was dirty and disgusting work. Denker’s repugnance does not motivate him to reconsider the atrocious acts he is carrying out. In conclusion, Welzer writes:

> The difficulties – for example the fact that a gunner might become nauseous – were concomitants of a process that many of the immediate perpetrators found unpleasant, but these difficulties were overcome (Jensen and Szejnmann 2008, 177–178).

When another soldier, Karl Milze, explains that he eventually stopped feeling ill during the shootings, Welzer insists that we call this a process of normalization instead of brutalization. As the soldiers were in a hermetically closed normative structure, they never doubted the legitimacy of their actions. The soldiers did become more brutal but this was because this was normal and required behavior. In the Nazi worldview these executions were necessary
and the right thing to do (Welzer and Christ 2007, 157; 173). The men did not feel any guilt or moral conflict. This lack of emotion could even strike the men themselves as odd. “Strangely enough,” a young soldier wrote to his family about the executions, “I feel nothing, no pity – nothing” (Welzer and Christ 2007, 202, my translation).

Welzer’s recent book Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying unearths further evidence for his non-moral interpretation of perpetrator disgust. The book reveals secretly recorded conversations between German prisoners of war in British capture during World War II, discovered by historian Sönke Neitzel. In contrast to most Nazi perpetrator testimonies available, which emerge from police interrogations and trials, the unique nature of the source material provides us with more direct insight into how the men talked to each other about perpetrator disgust during the war.

There are very few explicit stories about the physical manifestations of perpetrator disgust in the recorded conversations, and Neitzel and Welzer suggest that this is due to the taboos within military culture. A good story to fellow comrades in capture was either witty, horrible or heroic, but never embarrassing (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 54). German POWs boast and emphasize their own masculinity and, when they do tell stories of “nerves being shot”, it is mainly about someone other than the narrator himself. In short, even if some of these men did sympathize with the victims or had experienced emotional breakdowns, this was not the setting to talk explicitly about it (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 161). Such behavior was considered antisocial at the time and thus conversationally off-limits (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 94). The few stories on perpetrator disgust we do find in the recordings seem to have little to do with moral condemnation.

One soldier, Minnieur, tells about the executions of Lithuanian Jews near Vilna. His companion Hartelt laughs when Minnieur explains that the Germans reused the clothes and valuables of the Jews. In response, Minnieur says, “Believe me, if you had seen it, it would have made you shudder! We watched one of these executions once” (Neitzel and Welzer 2012,
He mentions that he was present the day a pretty Jewish girl, one with whom he had slept with the night before, was executed. He ends his story with the remark that it was the girl’s “bad luck” to die with the other 75,000 Jews during this operation (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 115–118). As Neitzel and Welzer comment, bearing witness to the killings may cause a feeling of horror, “but murder per se is part of the universe of things that simply happen” (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 119).

In general the protocols reveal that the soldiers saw the annihilation of the Jews as necessary, though they expressed horror over the methods of executions. In the words of one soldier, “This mass-shooting of Jews absolutely sickens me. This murdering is no profession! Hooligans can do that” (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 120). Another quotes his father—a dedicated anti-Semite—as saying that the methods they used were horrible (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 121). A Luftwaffe pilot explains that it took him only two to three days to get used to the violence. On the first day it seemed terrible, but then he thought “Hell! Orders are orders”. On the second and third day he didn’t feel much—on the fourth day he enjoyed it. He does remark that he felt really bad about the screaming of the horses—this he found abhorrent (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 48).

At the same time as some soldiers conceived of their own abhorrence as an aesthetic disgust, they were also compelled by stories that indicated a moral conflict. One soldier, Heinrich Kittel, tells of his horror of the mass executions in Latvia near Dvinsk. He explains that he wanted to do something about the killings, but his complaints to the local security service are practical and technical. Kittel points out that they should move the executions to the forest where they would be hidden, instead of conducting them out in the open. Another reason to move is that that his company is getting their drinking water from deep springs around the killing sites. “We are getting nothing but corpse water!” he complains.

Kittel also mentions a friend who may have experienced perpetrator disgust as a consequence of moral conflict. “The man was done for
weeks,” he explains. “He sat in the corner the whole time and wept. He said: ‘When one considers that it may be like that everywhere!’”. Perhaps as an explanation for this strong emotional reaction, Kittel adds that the man was “an important scientist and musician with a highly strung nervous system” (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 105).

Kittel’s dialogue partner, Felbert, does not appear to have heard of the annihilations before, and he remarks that the world hates the Germans because of these crimes. Kittel’s response reveals a staggering anti-Semitism: “If one were to destroy all the Jews of the world simultaneously there wouldn’t remain a single accuser” (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 105). The remark affirms that Kittel is not bothered by the murder of Jews, but by the methods of mass murder. Felbert becomes furious at this comment and shouts, “We must accuse the people who have done it!” Kittel responds that this is an admission that the whole state system was wrongly built. Felbert insists that such a thing is wrong but later expresses his curiosity about the young, pretty Jewish girls—were they turned into a harem?

Another POW, Major General Bruhn, later retells Kittel’s story about the executions in Latvia. As it happens in a game of Chinese whispers, many details in the story have changed but Bruhn’s retelling does show us that the men did find stories of perpetrator disgust interesting and worth discussing. Bruhn makes sure to emphasize that he was shocked to hear that Kittel did not object to the atrocities he witnessed. He is outraged at the coldness of Kittel and does not believe his expressions of horror (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 109–110). The story shows that the men evaluated and discriminated between sincere and false instances of moral horror.

Goldhagen, Welzer and Neitzel’s non-moral interpretations present a valuable critique of the nativist interpretation of perpetrator disgust. Indeed, in many cases of perpetrator disgust there is very little evidence of moral
repugnance. This perspective urges us to be aware of the normative gulf between the perpetrators and ourselves. Perpetrator disgust should not be confused for spectator disgust. In pointing this out, Welzer addresses an important methodological blind spot that dominates much of the work done on perpetrators of war crimes and genocide.

Still, it is unpersuasive to insist that none of the case studies of perpetrator disgust can be understood to indicate moral conflict. As many others have noted, Goldhagen provides a one-dimensional and deterministic model of the Nazi perpetrators. He argues that “a demonological anti-Semitism, of the virulent racial variety, was the common structure of German society in general” (Goldhagen 1996, 393). This all-encompassing model simply does not allow for cases in which the perpetrators were in doubt of the legitimacy of their actions.

Similarly, Neitzel and Welzer seem to ignore the diversity of reports we find among the conversations of the soldiers. It is certainly true that many cases of perpetrator disgust show no sign of moral conflict—as in the case of the pilot who felt pity for the horses, but not for the people he killed. But other instances testify to the fact that perpetrators also interpreted some kinds of perpetrator disgust as moral. For this reason and the frequency with which perpetrator disgust is discussed as something to be overcome, it seems unconvincing that Nazi soldiers had no moral barriers to mass killing.

In the presentation of his methodological approach, Goldhagen explains that his aim is to take the phenomenology of the killings seriously, and so provides readers with explicit details of the killing scenes in order to

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24 In response to Goldhagen’s critique, Browning adjusted some parts of his thesis in a later study. However, this study on the German Order Police primarily confirms the conclusion he drew in in *Ordinary Men*: (i) A minority of the men became eager, often sadistic killers and were transformed by their doing; (ii) A small minority—more than 10 percent but less than 20 percent—sought to evade participation in the killing though most continued to aid and abet the killing process (e.g. by cordon duty and searches); (iii) Between these two groups there was a large middle group that followed orders and complied, but did not show eagerness to kill Jews—over time, however, they were transformed into eager killers. Browning does offer a crucial revision to his former work: (iv) Many in the category of eager killers were not transformed or brutalized by the situation itself, but were motivated men ready to kill Jews and other so-called enemies of the Reich from the beginning (Browning 2000, 166, 175).

25 For an introduction to the debate see Shandley 1998.
try convey their unimaginable horror. Echoing Hobbes, Goldhagen sees a “natural flow of sympathy for people who suffer great wrong” (Goldhagen 1996, 441). As an aside, we may quickly note the similarity of this idea to the basis for the nativist interpretation. But Goldhagen’s point is that the horror of the killing scenes would and should have caused a moral outrage if the soldiers had been “normal” human beings, and not Germans with an eliminatory mindset toward Jews. In principle, therefore, Goldhagen does not explicitly reject the idea that perpetrator disgust can contain a moral component. However, in staying true to his deterministic and one-dimensional understanding of the German people in this time period, he is forced to reject such a possibility for the perpetrators of Police Battalion 101 and other Nazi perpetrators.

If we take the conclusions in Welzer and Goldhagen’s interpretation model to their logical conclusions, none of the Nazi soldiers had to go through a process of moral transformation, because all Germans at the time were already culturally disposed and fixated on annihilating Jews. But as we have seen in the previous chapters, even highly ideological Nazis felt horrified at the confrontation with mass killings, and they had to either avoid further such exposure or learn how to overcome their disgust. The core of the argument in the nativist interpretation is that some cases of perpetrator disgust is a sign that even a malicious perpetrator can be in conflict with himself—that he is not a monolith of evil. The non-moral interpretation model cannot account for this complexity.

There is a third alternative. We can also understand some instances of perpetrator disgust as indications of a moral conflict while avoiding the pitfalls of the nativist interpretation. In this account, which I now turn our attention to, the moral component of the disgust response reflects habituation and socialization, not an innate and instinctual morality.
Habituation Interpretations

A moral conflict

After the shooting operation in Minsk, where Himmler was present and which I have already discussed at some length, SS-Gruppenführer Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski allegedly complained to Himmler:

Look at the eyes of the men of this Kommando, how deeply shaken they are! These men are finished [fertig] for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages [Entweder Nervenkrank oder Rohlinge]!

(Hilberg 1961, 646, emphasis in original).

A year later, in March 1942, Bach-Zelewski himself suffered a physical and psychological breakdown and went to Berlin for medical treatment. An SS-doctor reported that he was suffering “especially from visions in connection with the shootings of Jews that he himself had led, and from other difficult experiences in the east” (Browning 1998, 25). Worried about losing one of his favorite generals, Himmler took special precautions to ensure a full psychological treatment. After a few months, Bach-Zelewski indeed recovered and became chief of the anti-partisan formations in Russia (Lifton 1986, 437).

To philosopher Jonathan Glover, Bach-Zelewski’s physical and mental breakdown and Himmler’s uneasiness are “symptoms of inner conflict” and examples of a “breakthrough of the human responses” (Glover 2000, 345). In his Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century, Glover attempts to explain why so many atrocities happened in the twentieth century. He argues that human behavior is shaped by what he calls moral resources, human and psychological tendencies that work against narrowly selfish behavior (Glover 2000, 22). Moral resources are manifested in any
number of ways. They can be positive responses such as personal generosity and admiration of courage. In the case of perpetrator disgust, moral resources produce the revulsion to cruelty and suffering. Glover argues that our inclination to show disgust at someone’s humiliation is “a powerful restraint on barbarism” (Glover 2000, 23).

In Glover’s account, this capacity to feel disgust at someone’s humiliation is shaped by socialization and moral upbringing. In genocidal processes, however, brutalization erodes such moral responses. Glover compares the process of brutalization with the principle of “phronesis” (practical reason) in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Generally speaking, we learn how to become moral by doing moral acts and become brave by doing brave acts. We don’t learn morality merely from the knowledge of moral principles, but first and foremost from social interaction. Similarly, soldiers become brutalized by performing brutal acts. The men’s old moral habits are eroded and supplanted by new genocidal habits (Glover 2000, 349). The perpetration of atrocities neutralizes the soldiers’ moral responses—as a result, the soldiers dismiss them as weakness and squeamishness (Glover 2000, 35). In the Nazi ideology, moral responses of sympathy were replaced with hardness, and this resulted in a radical reconstruction of the soldiers’ moral identity. Like Arendt, Glover understands this as a twisted Kantian deontology, one in which emotional responses are ignored and a principled hardness is viewed as desirable in and of itself (Glover 2000, 327).

Glover understands the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust as a brief instance when the moral responses manage to overcome this hard façade. Moral revulsion breaks through, as he puts it. In the words of a Soviet soldier recalling an episode from his time in Afghanistan:

Only once something snapped inside me and I was struck by the horror of what we were doing. We were combing through a village. You fling open the door and throw in a grenade in case there’s a machine-gun waiting for you . . . I threw the grenade,
went in and saw women, two little boys and a baby in some kind of box making do for a cot. You have to find some kind of justification to stop yourself going mad (Glover 2000, 53).

In this case, Glover argues that the moral identity of the soldier may be lost, but something triggers his forgotten moral commitments. Old or suppressed moral habits are brought to surface and momentarily produce what Glover calls a moral human response.

Glover emphasizes that such cases of moral horror have their limitations; they are usually brief and occur without reflection. Most importantly, they rarely inspire moral action. For ideological Nazis like Eichmann and Bach-Zelewski, the breakdowns were psychological problems—sign of weakness to be overcome. They did not think of them in moral terms. As Dr. Pfannmüller, a Nazi doctor at the Eglfing-Haar Asylum, explains his reluctance to take part in the children’s program:

The new measures are so convincing that I had hoped to be able to discard all personal considerations . . . despite my intellectual understanding and good will, I cannot help stating that I am temperamentally not fitted for this. As eager as I often am to correct the natural course of events, it is just as repugnant to me to do so systematically, after cold-blooded consideration, according to objective principles of science, without being affected by a doctor’s feeling for his patient . . . I feel emotionally tied to the children as their medical guard, and I think that this emotional contact is not necessarily a weakness from the point of view of a Nationalist Socialist doctor . . . I prefer to see clearly and to recognize that I am too gentle for this work than to disappoint you later (Glover 2000, 347).
The doctor interprets his repugnance at the systematic killing of innocent children as the problem of his own gentleness. About the general project of correcting the natural course of events, that is, the annihilation of inferior groups of people, he is eager. A German woman who lived close to the death camp Mauthausen excuses herself in a similar fashion:

One is often an unwilling witness to such outrage. I am anyway sickly and such a sight makes such a demand on my nerves that in the long run I cannot bear this. I request that it be arranged that such inhuman deeds be discontinued, or else done where one does not see it (Glover 2000, 379–380).

Like Eichmann and Dr. Pfannmüller, this German woman characterizes herself as the sort of person who is easily sickened. She does characterize the killings in the camp as inhuman, but then requests that they simply be relocated. It is an open question if the woman’s stance reflects true moral indignation but, in most of these cases, as Glover notes, even moral disgust does not result in moral action or sympathy with the victims, but is instead transformed into self-pity. Even Rudolf Höss, the notorious camp leader of Auschwitz-Birkenau, explains his personal strategies for coping with the horrors he directed and oversaw:

If I was deeply affected by some incident, I found it impossible to go back to my home and my family. I would mount my horse and ride, until I had chased the terrible picture away. Often, at night, I would walk away through the stables and seek relief among my beloved animals (Glover 2000, 348; Höss 1961, 174).

Although Glover recognizes the inherent frailty of perpetrator disgust, he nonetheless believes that ethical theory should take such responses seriously. At the thought of Auschwitz or other such atrocities, “never again” is more
compelling than any abstract ethical principle as “revulsion against these things which people have done has a central place” (Glover 2000, 406). The Nazis' brutal misrecognition of such emotional responses demonstrates their significance. Hardened Nazis like Eichmann, Bach-Zelewski and Höss developed a perverse moral identity, because they completely separated moral principles from emotional responses (Glover 2000, 404). As a result, Glover cautions moral theory against a one-sided appraisal of the primacy of moral identity or character, duty or similar ethical concepts. For the prevention of atrocities, we should consider such emotional responses as the core of moral theory (Glover 2000, 406).

Theodor Adorno draws the same conclusion in Negative Dialectics. He argues that the new categorical imperative “Never again!” gives us a bodily sense of morality, arising from the immediate abhorrence (“Abscheu”) that we feel at the Nazi genocide. He argues that only in this “material motive” can morality survive in the aftermath of atrocity. A discursive project seeking to find reasons for the imperative is outrageous: the physical sensation of the moral abhorrence is sufficient cause (Adorno 1994, 365). Although Adorno’s conception of morality cannot be reduced to this one statement,26 his position clearly implies that our capacity to feel this abhorrence is an essential part of what makes us moral. Similarly, Glover argues that we feel revolted when we hear about contemporary atrocities unless we are linked to the perpetrators. This human response should “be enough to make the elimination of these horrors a central human project” (Glover 2000, 42).

Philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen also argues that empathy, understood as vicarious responses of sympathy and altruism, is the foundation of human morality. We cannot perceive suffering in a neutral and disinterested way unless our moral perception skills are severely damaged (Vetlesen 1994, 158). As a result, Vetlesen also interprets Himmler and Bach-

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26 For a more detailed account consult Gerhard Schweppenhäuser’s work on Adorno, for example Schweppenhäuser 2004.
Zelewski’s physical and emotional discomfort at the shooting in Minsk as a sign of a moral conflict. With reference to philosophers K.E. Løgstrup and Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy’s of closeness, Vetlesen argues that even these hardened and ideological Nazis cannot escape “the calling of the other” because of their proximity to the victims. Furthermore, by drawing on Jean Paul Sartre’s idea of the power of the other’s gaze, Vetlesen even argues that the perpetrator felt shame (Vetlesen 1994, 203).  

Like the proponents of the nativist interpretation that I have considered, Vetlesen, Adorno and Glover nominate the impulses underlying our abhorrence at atrocity and suffering as a central feature of human morality. They do not, however, understand this disgust as instinctual and natural. In their view, we learn to feel disgust for cruelty as part of our moral education. It is an empathic response acquired from social interaction (Vetlesen 1994, 326).

**Monstrous pity**

Advocates of both the nativist and the habituation interpretation seem to hold that, if a case of perpetrator disgust reflects a moral conflict, then it might also contain the seed for prosocial action. Perpetrators like Eichmann, Bach-Zelewski and others who experienced emotional breakdowns or physical repugnance may have questioned their crimes if they had taken these responses more seriously.

But Welzer warns us that this sort of argumentation is dangerously normative, because it projects the scholars’ own moral outrage.

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27 Vetlesen later refutes parts of his interpretation in Vetlesen 2011 and Vetlesen 2005. We will revisit this point in a later discussion.

28 I borrow the term prosocial action from social psychology. It refers to a broad range of actions “intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself—actions such as helping, comforting, sharing, and cooperation” (Batson and Powell 2003).
onto the responses of the perpetrator. As I have previously discussed, the
difference between spectator and perpetrator disgust must be taken seriously.

Spectator disgust is the physical and emotional outrage that Adorno puts forth as the basis for the moral condemnation, “Never again!”. It is the horror of Jan Karski’s account of a visit to the Warsaw ghetto in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.\(^{29}\) As he begins his testimony, Karski breaks down in tears and runs out of the room. He then returns to tell of the sealed-off ghetto where naked corpses were decaying on the streets and children were left alone to starve. Proponents of nativist and habituation interpretations tend to conflate Karski’s spectator disgust (and the disgust we, as audience to his testimony, experience) with perpetrator disgust. In these arguments, every human being feels a bodily resistance to human killing and suffering. But, while perpetrator disgust may resemble spectator disgust, there seems to be little prosocial potential in such a response. On the contrary, in overcoming the impulse, the perpetrator typically becomes even more brutalized.

The narrator in Jonathan Littell’s novel, *The Kindly Ones*, is a perpetrator who is morally conflicted, but not remorseful.\(^{30}\) His perpetrator disgust reflects a moral conflict that does not lead to prosocial action. On the contrary, it produces sadism of the most extreme sort. As Littell’s character is fictional, we should first and foremost consider him Littell’s representation or interpretation of a perpetrator and perpetrator disgust. However, his portrayal dovetails with a range of dominant theories in social psychology and genocide studies that advocate a modified habituation interpretation, seeing the disgust response as sign of a moral conflict without presuming that it necessarily motivates prosocial action. As an alternative to both the nativist interpretation and non-moral interpretation of perpetrator disgust, this position takes the stance that perpetrator disgust is neither a subconscious message from moral instincts nor an entirely non-moral response. Some favor

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\(^{29}\) Jan Karski was a representative of the Polish Civil Directorate who reported to the Allied forces in London and the United States about the atrocities committed against Jews.

\(^{30}\) *The Kindly Ones*, 2009, originally published in French as *Les Bienveillantes*, 2006. The book sold more than 700,000 books in France and received the Prix Goncourt and the Grand Prix du Roman de L’Académie Française.
a cognitive interpretation of the disgust as sign of a conflict between moral principles, while others offer a physicalistic interpretation. In either case, these habituation interpretations argue that a moral transformation takes place, during which the perpetrator learns to overcome his abhorrence by learning to accept or even enjoy the violence.

In *The Kindly Ones*, Maximilien Aue, a former SS-officer, details his experiences at the forefront of Nazi Germany’s perpetuation of the Final Solution. He has a doctorate in law and suffers from nausea and several other post-traumatic stress symptoms as a result of his experiences and crimes. Aue’s task was to report on the progress of the elimination of the Jews, the morale of the Wehrmacht, and on the living conditions in the camps. Remarkably, as some historians have noted, he manages to witness some of the key events of the Second World War: the massacre at Babi Yar, the starvation and defeat of the German Army at Stalingrad, the deportation of the Hungarian Jews, the death marches, and the allied bombing attacks on Berlin at the end of the war.

The book is known for its highly detailed descriptions of violence, leading some to reject it as Holocaust-pornography. Claude Lanzmann denounced the novel’s “decor of death,” the way in which, as some critics saw it, the book and perhaps its author, seem to revel in offering graphic details of atrocities (Mendelsohn 2009). Many others have recognized the value of the raw and uncensored portrayal of a Nazi perpetrator, which decisively abandons the Hollywood-adapted Holocaust we see in movies like Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993).

Aue interprets his own perpetrator disgust as a sign of moral conflict. As Hoffmann and Kastenbaum from Police Battalion 101 did in their trials, Aue points to it as evidence of his humanity. He urges the reader to accept his perspective, insisting he is “a man like other men, I am a man like you. I tell you I am just like you! (Littell 2009, 24).”

I am indebted to Bettine Siertsema, VU University Amsterdam, and Moritz Schramm, University of Southern Denmark, for making me aware of the following quotes.
Aue’s first experience of perpetrator disgust occurs at a mass grave in Ukraine, where a four-year-old girl, whose mother has just been shot and thrown in a trench, walks up to him and takes his hand:

I caressed her hair. We stayed for several minutes. I was dizzy, I wanted to cry. ‘Come with me,’ I said in German, ‘don’t be afraid, come.’ I headed for the entrance of the pit; she stayed in place, holding me by the hand, then followed me. I picked her up and held her out to a Waffen-SS: ‘Be gentle with her,’ I said to him stupidly. I felt an insane rage, but didn’t want to take it out on the girl, or the soldier (Littell 2009, 109).

In spite of Aue’s emotional and physical reactions—dizziness, anger, and an urge to cry—he walks the girl to her death. If what he felt was pity or moral conflict, these emotions do not motivate him to save the girl. Also in Ukraine, at Babi Yar, this impulse that Aue calls monstrous pity finds its outlet. A half-dead woman in a mass grave makes eye contact with Aue:

And that look stuck into me, split open my stomach and a flood of sawdust pour out, I was a rag doll and didn’t feel anything, and at the same time, I wanted with all my heart to bend over and brush the dirt and sweat off her forehead, caress her cheek and tell her that it was going to be all right, that everything would be fine, but instead I convulsively shot a bullet into her head, which after all came down to the same thing, for her in any case, if not for me, since at the thought of this senseless human waste I was filled with immense, boundless rage, I kept shooting at her... (Littell 2009, 130).

Aue observes himself shooting at the dead body in the pit as if his arm has detached itself and fires of its own volition. In the end he breaks down and
cries. The reader is left with the impression that Aue feels a spontaneous compassion with the woman and also that he feels detached from his crime. Later he contemplates how his initial pity toward the wounded woman—and his inability to act on it—is the cause of his rage:

I now thought I could understand better the reactions of the men and officers during the executions. If they suffered, as I had suffered during the Great Action, it wasn’t just because of the smell and sight of blood, but because of the terror and the moral suffering of the people they shot; in the same way, their victims often suffered more from the suffering and death before their eyes, of those they loved, wives, parents, beloved children, than from their own death, which came to them in the end like a deliverance. In many cases, I said to myself, what I had taken for gratuitous sadism, the astonishing brutality with which some men treated the condemned before executing them, was nothing but a consequence of the monstrous pity they felt and which, incapable of expressing itself otherwise, turned into rage, without object, and which thus almost inevitably had to turn against those who had originally provoked it. If the terrible massacres of the East prove one thing, paradoxically, it is the awful, inalterable solidarity of humanity (Littell 2009, 147).

Here Aue presents us with three claims. First, in contrast to Goldhagen and Welzer, he emphasizes that his monstrous pity did not arise merely from the physically revolting smells and sights. Instead, it is a response to the suffering of the victims—a moral disgust. Second, he claims that perpetrator disgust can be compared to the horror that victims experience when they witness the death and suffering of their loved ones. Third, he argues that the rage, brutality and sadism of soldiers is a direct product of their perpetrator disgust (“a consequence of the monstrous pity they felt”). Because the soldiers do not
have the possibility of expressing their empathy, this conflict of feelings inevitably transforms into rage towards those who provoked the emotional response. Aue connects these reflections on the soldiers’ monstrous pity to the overall thesis that he steadily insists upon—his fellow soldiers and he are part of humanity:

As brutalized and habituated as they may have become none of our men could kill a Jewish women without thinking about his wife, his sister, or his mother, or kill a Jewish child without seeing his own children in front of him in the pit. Their reactions, their violence, their alcoholism, the nervous depressions, the suicides, my own sadness, all that demonstrated that the other exists, exists as an other, as a human, and that no will, no ideology, no amount of stupidity, or alcohol can break this bond, tenuous, but indestructible. This is a fact, not an opinion (Littell 2009, 147).

According to Aue, the emotional and physical reactions are sufficient to demonstrate the humanity of the men. But later in his narrative, Aue contradicts himself, noting that he was afraid of how numb he became: “I was trying, desperately but in vain, to regain [...] that initial shock, that sensation of a rupture” (Littell 2009, 178–179). Only much later does he regain the impulse of horror, as he witnesses the mass deportation of well-educated, middle-class Hungarian Jews:

... despite their yellow stars, they could have been German or at least Czech villagers, and it gave me sinister thoughts. I imagined those neat, tidy boys or those young women with their discreet charm being gassed—thoughts that turned my stomach, but there was nothing to be done, I looked at the pregnant women and imagined them in the gas chambers [...] and from that thought
memories of Ukraine flowed in, and for the first time in a long time I wanted to vomit, vomit my powerlessness, my sadness, my useless life (Littell 2009, 789).

In this case his monstrous pity does not turn to violent rage, but gives way to a pathetic self-pity similar to that felt by Adolf Eichmann in Auschwitz and Franz Suchomel in Treblinka. “We also cried, we vomited and cried”, Suchomel reminds us.

The principal idea in Littell’s representation of perpetrator disgust is that, although the monstrous pity may reflect a moral conflict and even some regard for the victim, it does not motivate the perpetrator to moral action. Instead the disgust can develop into sadism and self-pity.

In writing The Kindly Ones, Littell has been clearly inspired by the main voices in the academic literature on the social psychology of Nazi perpetrators. While there is an agreement in this field that perpetrator disgust can be a reflection of conflict in the subject, scholars disagree if the disgust is the result of a natural bodily response or a conflict between moral principles.

High on atrocity: opponent-process theory

Social psychologist Roy F. Baumeister carefully navigates between the nativist interpretation and the non-moral interpretation. He suggests that cases of perpetrator disgust in Browning’s Police Battalion 101 were not a result of moral or philosophical objections, but of visceral disgust and alarm (Baumeister and Vohs 2004, 97).

In contrast to Goldhagen and Welzer, however, he nonetheless identifies perpetrator disgust as a response to the suffering of the victim. Baumeister and his colleagues assume that harming others leads most perpetrators to suffer physical and emotional distress: “The initial reaction to hurting others (at least among adults) appears to be quite aversive, and the
distress seems to be at a visceral level rather than a moral or abstract one” (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 213). The cause of this distress does not necessarily indicate a moral conflict, but a “seemingly natural aversion to hurting” (Baumeister and Vohs 2004, 97). In contrast to Glover’s conceptualization of the disgust response as an inherently moral one, Baumeister asserts that the disgust response needs to be accompanied by explicit feelings of guilt before we can call it moral in character.

Baumeister and his colleagues set out to explain how sadism emerges in spite of this natural aversion to harming others. They propose a theory that explains how evil and sadism can be “intrinsically appealing”, and find an explanation model in the opponent processes theory, developed by Richard L. Solomon and John D. Corbit. The basics of the theory hold that:

... each response that takes the body away from its stable, resting state must be followed by an internal process that returns the body to its normal state. Furthermore, they contended that the initial, departing (the A process) response is often strong at first, whereas the restorative B process is relatively inefficient, but overtime (i.e., through many similar experiences), the B process becomes increasingly efficient and powerful, whereas the A process becomes weaker. In effect, the B process comes to dominate (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 213).

To take a simple example, consider a runner. In the beginning, an inexperienced runner feels an increased heart rate and breathing. This so-called A-process can be initially difficult. The B-process returns the body’s heart rate and breathing to normal and eventually makes running pleasurable. In popular terms, the B-process is called “A runner’s high”. If a runner continues training, the effects of the B-process will become increasingly dominant and the effects of the A-process will quickly diminish.
In examples of perpetrator disgust, Baumeister and his colleagues explain the perpetrator’s emotional and physical distress as the A-process: harming another human being causes “severe distress that is typically of a visceral rather than apparently moral nature” (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 214). The B-process involves a pleasurable feeling, a feeling of euphoria that becomes the effective antidote to the discomfiting experience of distress and disgust. Simply put, the perpetrators get high on atrocity. The pleasurable effect of the B-process is dependent on the A-process. As the violence becomes routine, the subject would have to increase the nature of his violence to more sadistic levels in order to activate the B-process (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 214).

As a sign of an activated B-process, we may consider, for example, the bizarre trophy-pictures of soldiers posing next to mutilated bodies. One such recent example from the war in Afghanistan is the photo—initially published by Der Spiegel in March 2011—of American Private Jeremy Morlock, who smiles as he lifts up the head of a body by the hair. Morlock was later sentenced to 24 years of jail time for being part of a death squad that murdered three Afghan civilians (Yardley 2011). As of the writing of this chapter, it has been revealed that German security guards took similar pictures while they abused refugees in an asylum center in Burbach (Hill 2014). According to Baumeister and his colleagues, another sign of the B-process is laughter:

When one is shocked by one's own actions into remorse and disgust, the response of seemingly involuntary, bizarre laughter may reflect the body's efforts to counteract the distress with a response that is normally pleasant and happy (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 214).

Notice the surprising amount of agency that Baumeister and his colleagues ascribe to the body and the physicalistic processes of feelings. If we are to
understand their theory literally, the body will always try to counteract a process of physiological unpleasantness (A-process) with a process of pleasant feelings (B-process). At its core, this is an automatic process that occurs independently of the mind. The natural bodily response to the distress we feel when harming someone is pleasure (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 219).

There is an important caveat to this explanation. If the visceral discomfort in perpetrator disgust is a result of a feeling of guilt, Baumeister and his colleagues argue that the body will not automatically respond with a pleasurable B-process. Guilt thus functions as a moderator to the B-process, and so as a safeguard against the development of sadism. It is not clear why guilt and bad conscience (as uncomfortable physical and emotional states) would not themselves initiate a pleasant B-process, but the authors hypothesize that this is due to the nature of guilt as a socialized emotion. Because it depends on cognitive processes, the innate mechanisms of the body do not have a prepared mechanism to counter-act it. In short, the body cannot produce euphoria in response to guilt (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 214):

The operation of guilt would be aided by the fact that, initially, the B process is likely to be weak and inefficient, and therefore, guilt feelings could combine with the physical disgust to make the person reject the entire harm doing episode (Baumeister and Campbell 1999, 214).

In a certain sense, Baumeister and his colleagues provide us with a convincing account of perpetrator disgust. Mere discomfort in itself does not seem to inhibit violence, as the overwhelming evidence of perpetrator disgust demonstrates. The discomfort will only function as a violence-inhibitor if it is associated with guilt feelings. If the perpetrator feels no guilt, or does not reflect on the act in moral terms, the process of brutalization continues. In other words, guilt-free violence can become pleasant. Baumeister and his colleagues point to a range of examples that underpin this conclusion. Many
hunters feel disgust in the beginning, but most learn to enjoy hunting and killing prey. Similarly, police and military personnel learn to derive pride and satisfaction from performing acts of violence, for example in combat or state-sanctioned torture. As we learned throughout the previous chapters of this section, this is also the case for perpetrators of state-sanctioned genocides. To sum up, if the perpetrator does not believe his actions are wrong, he can quickly overcome the feeling of discomfort and instead learn to find pleasure in performing violence. But if the perpetrator feels guilt, his visceral and emotional stress may prompt him to abominate the acts he has performed.

In other ways, Baumeister’s theory is problematic. Most fundamentally, it has a problem in distinguishing between the discomfort caused by guilt (i.e. conflicting moral principles) and the pure discomfort which is a non-moral response to the victims’ suffering. Even if we accept the clear distinction made between cognitive and physical sources of discomfort, it is far from obvious how we (or the agent himself) can distinguish between these types of discomfort in any practical sense.

If we recall the discussion of the different components of emotions that I discussed in the introduction, the fundamental question is whether the symptoms of perpetrator disgust have an intentional object, i.e. if they are the bodily aspect of an emotion, or merely caused by an internal or external stimuli. As I shown, the soldiers themselves interpret these feelings of discomfort in various ways. Sometimes they believe the discomfort is a product of moral conflict, but may feel ashamed to appear weak or insufficiently committed to the prevailing ideology. Later, they often see an advantage in presenting their discomfort as a sign of moral conflict, to appear more human. Objectively speaking, the nature of the discomfort under the circumstances remains very much an open question. This problem feeds the many different scholarly interpretations of perpetrator disgust. I devote a chapter in section two to a more thorough discussion of this question and a broad discussion on the prosocial potential of vicarious distress.

Grossman also points to the euphoria that follows killing (Grossman 2009, 211–212).
A related problem in Baumeister’s theory is that he and his colleagues overestimate the prosocial motivation in guilt. It is possible for a soldier to initially feel both guilt and discomfort over the victims’ suffering (the A-process) without the guilt feelings motivating him to change his action. Typically the organizational hierarchy, the ideology at work, and the perpetrator himself all help rationalize the situation and the soldier’s interpretation under the circumstances, producing a new standard in which the massacre of civilians can be justified. But Baumeister’s theory cannot account for such a change in the agent’s moral standards, focusing as it does on the emotional processes that happen independently of the mind and our moral principles. With his claim that the distress response to another’s suffering is non-moral and purely natural, Baumeister’s theory avoids the nativist pitfall of perpetrator disgust as an outburst of an innate morality, but instead commits the error of a new form of physicalistic nativism. The theory of cognitive dissonance produces a better account of how perpetrators overcome their abhorrence, because it understands distress responses as dependent on cognitive processes and moral principles.

**Cognitive dissonance**

According to Leon Festinger, we experience dissonance, such as stress, and physical and emotional discomfort, when there are inconsistencies between our actions and our beliefs. When we are forced to continue the behavior that causes the dissonance, we change our beliefs and values so they become consistent with our behavior and actions, thereby reducing the dissonance. Festinger and James M. Carlsmith made a laboratory experiment designed to test this theory:

Subjects were subjected to a boring experience and then paid to tell someone that the experience had been interesting and
enjoyable. The amount of money paid the subject was varied. The private opinions of the subjects concerning the experience were then determined (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959).

The experiment showed that if a person is induced to do or say something contrary to her private opinion, she tends to change her opinion to correspond with what she was induced to do or say. Participants who were asked to tell someone that the experiment was fun ended up believing that the experiment was fun. Festinger and Carlsmith found that the effects did not increase with added incentives. Those who were offered 20 dollars to do a pep talk were less inclined to change their mind than those who were offered one dollar. In other words, people were less inclined to internalize new opinions if they felt pressured to do so.

In comparison to the opponent process theory, cognitive dissonance provides a superior explanation for the adaptation of soldiers to crimes of mass atrocity. In the case of Police Battalion 101, commander Major Trapp was a weak authority who did not pressure the men into pursuing the orders given. As already discussed, the men were reluctant to undertake the killing operation but most did so out of a sense of obligation and loyalty to other men in the battalion. After the initial killing of Jewish civilians, which left many members of the battalion shaken, they did not conclude that their actions were wrong, but instead changed their opinions about what it meant to kill.

In Festinger’s terminology, the men experienced cognitive dissonance because killing civilians conflicted with an internalized moral principle that dictated a prohibition against killing. But in rationalizing their actions, the men overcame the dissonance by simply altering their view of the principles that conflicted with their actions. In short, they justified and trivialized the mass murder of Jewish civilians. These justifications became or were adopted as their own. In this version of the habituation interpretation of perpetrator disgust is a product of a moral conflict in the subject. The disgust
is spontaneous and involuntary, but not a sign of a natural, moral instinct. Instead, the disgust is a response to the subject’s own violation of internalized moral and social principles. I explore more aspects of this process of internalization in section two.

Many social psychologists are inspired by Festinger’s insight that human beings change their principles in order to overcome a feeling of dissonance. Stanley Milgram’s Obedience to Authority Experiment and Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment confirm the basic dynamics of Festinger’s theory. While Zimbardo emphasizes the power relations of the situation, Milgram focuses on the role of the authority, but both conclude that most people in these experiments overcome their initial dissonance by adapting to the situation even when this entails the violation of fundamental and deeply internalized moral constraints (Milgram 1963; Zimbardo, Maslach, and Haney 2000).

In Milgram’s first sets of experiments in 1961 many of the experiment’s subjects experienced emotional and physical discomfort similar to perpetrator disgust. Volunteer subjects were assigned the role of the teacher in what they thought was an experiment about learning abilities. The teacher administered an electric shock to the learner (an actor) every time he or she gave an incorrect answer. The shock would increase by 15-volts for each wrong answer, rising all the way to 450 volts.

Many of the volunteer subjects showed signs of nervousness, especially when administering the more powerful shocks. Characteristic responses were sweating, trembling, stuttering, lip biting, groaning, and the digging of fingernails into flesh. Another sign of tension was nervous laughter and smiling—what Baumeister might call a sign of the pleasurable B-process—although the subjects who experienced this claimed to have taken no sadistic joy in post-experiment interviews. Full-blown, uncontrollable seizures were observed in a few subjects, and on one occasion they had to halt the experiment because the seizure was violently convulsive (Milgram 1963,
Although the subjects experienced great tension and emotional strain, many chose to go on with the experiment. As one observer explains:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: "Oh God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end (Milgram 1963, 377).

Milgram’s experiments have been criticized from many different angles. Most importantly for our purposes, critics have raised the question of whether the conclusions from the experiments can be generalized and compared to the perpetration of mass-crime. While perpetrator disgust takes place in a entirely different context—it is not an experiment and both the perpetrator and the victim are aware of this fact—we can compare the emotional processes without asserting a complete equivalence between the situations. As in the cases of perpetrator disgust, most subjects in Milgram’s experiments manage to ignore their emotional and bodily discomfort and continue to administer the increasingly harmful electric shocks to the learner. Both situations testify that a transgression of moral principles gives rise to a strong physical and emotional discomfort, but also that this physical dissonance (even when it is a product of a moral conflict) is not a safeguard against continuing the act. In cases of perpetrator disgust the situation itself (as Zimbardo would say) and the authority of the ideology and the commanders (Milgram) provides the perpetrator with good reasons for his actions, so that the perpetrator changes his moral principles to align with the brutal acts.

33 For an overview of the criticism of Milgram, see Mastroianni 2002.
Social psychologists James Waller and Ervin Staub call this process learning by participation. Waller examines a broad range of genocidal perpetrators and concludes that gradually, as they become accustomed to the gruesomeness of their crimes, they cease to react strongly to them. The perpetration of what Waller calls extraordinary evil becomes habitual and routinized (Waller 2007, 244). The men were no longer bothered by any instance of their conscience, repressed or not. The thesis of learning by participation has wide recognition as an explanatory model for how ordinary people develop a genocidal mentality. In this account, brutal and evil behavior is not necessarily dependent on a certain disposition or inherent potential; it is something that can be developed in everyone. “Evil acts not only reflect the self, they shape the self”, as James Waller puts it (Waller 2007, 239). In the previous chapters, we heard Jonathan Glover and Christopher Browning express similar versions of this thesis.

In Waller and Staub’s framework, perpetrator disgust is also a manifestation of a final inhibition or a moral constraint against the killing of civilians. It reflects the tipping point: a situation in which the perpetrator still functions in accordance with normal moral values that strictly forbid massacres. But in contrast to nativist interpretations, the physical and emotional roots of this moral constraint are social. To Waller, the physical outburst of discomfort shows that the perpetrators were ordinary men with ordinary human reactions, and not disturbed psychopaths who took pleasure in the killings:

A wide range of perpetrator accounts reveal that initial involvement in killing often led to nightmares, anxiety attacks, debilitating guilt, depression, gastrointestinal problems, temporary impotence, hallucinations, substance abuse, numerous bodily complaints, and many other signs of stress reactions (Waller 2007, 73).
Ervin Staub interprets perpetrator disgust slightly differently, offering a more mechanistic explanation. He argues that certain stimuli, such as “starving, skeleton-like inmates and naked dead bodies”, were so powerful that they could affect even well trained SS-members and high-ranking officials such as Eichmann and Himmler (Staub 1992, 146).

Many soldiers in the specially trained “Einsatzgruppen” suffered consequences in the form of nightmares, heavy drinking, nervous breakdowns and/or suicides. On this basis Staub concludes that dead human bodies have something “indiscriminate in their humanness”, and impact even those perpetrators who accepted and favored the idea of killing Jews (Staub 1992, 136). He adds that abhorrence is a signal to the self, “even in people who have moved to the stage of automatic (and not conscious) moral equilibration” (Staub 1992, 147). However, it is not clear what the content of this signal is, precisely. Staub seems to understand it as a moral grasping for something that is wrong, but does not seem to believe that it qualifies as a full-grown moral judgment.

No matter the extent of moral grappling with guilt, soldiers typically overcome perpetrator disgust and many learn to enjoy the violence, as demonstrated by the following story of a Vietnam veteran, referred to by both Waller and Staub:

Flying over a group of civilians in a helicopter, he was ordered to fire at them, an order he did not obey. The helicopter circled over the area and again he was ordered to fire, which again he did not do. The officer in charge then threatened him with court martial, which led him to fire the next time around. He vomited, felt profoundly distressed. The veteran reported that in a fairly short time firing at civilians became like an experience at a target-shooting gallery, and he began to enjoy it (Staub 1992, 134).
This development in the soldier’s character is similar to that of many soldiers in Police Battalion 101. In the same vein as Baumeister and Littell, Staub argues that sadistic behavior helps to erase the discomfort and makes it easier and even satisfying to obey the orders (Staub 1992, 140). Sadistic behavior thus becomes an efficient way of coping with the physical discomfort.

Drawing on American sociologist Thomas Scheff’s research, philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen also points out that “violence presupposes, and is made possible by, a silencing of emotions” (Vetlesen 2011, 53). To be clear, this is not a silencing of all emotional responses. Instead, it is a silencing of particular emotions such as compassion and sympathy, which we typically direct toward people in pain. But Vetlesen—inspired by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas—argues that it is impossible for us to remain neutral when facing another person in pain. In situations of mass atrocity the perpetrator does not ignore the victim’s suffering. Rather, he responds to it, not by helping the victim, but by silencing the victim’s cry for help with a deadly stroke (Vetlesen 2011, 62). In the same paper, Vetlesen points to various historical cases of atrocities where Arendt’s animal pity does not foster prosocial action, but instead triggers aggression.

Together with Littell, Baumeister and Staub, Vetlesen points to a crucial aspect of perpetrator disgust. We cannot with confidence claim to know whether this sort of response is rooted in animal pity, a moral conflict or pure visceral distress. We can, however, see that the disgust response is easily overruled by brutalization and sadistic emotions.
Managing Perpetrator Disgust

Perpetrator disgust appears easily overcome, but we also find cases of perpetrator disgust that occur many years after the crimes have been committed. This complex duality of weakness and strength within the phenomenon represents an important counter-argument to non-moral interpretations of perpetrator disgust as merely aesthetic disgust.

Most perpetrator organizations systematically use alcohol to remedy the physical and emotional discomfort that soldiers experience during actions of mass killing. This opens up a perverse parallel world in which partying and genocidal massacres go hand in hand. The men of Police Battalion 101 were offered massive amounts of alcohol both during and after their major actions (Browning, 61, 69). Personnel in the euthanasia program also had a heavy and organized use of alcohol, especially the so-called “burners” who were in charge of cremating the dead. These individuals were given an extra half-liter of schnapps in addition to the weekly ration of one liter. Historian Torben Jørgensen argues that these circumstances created a pseudo reality in which ordinary moral norms crumbled in parties and sexual encounters closed off from the outside world. Heavy drinking was widespread in the Third Reich. A survivor from the death camp Treblinka characterized the guards as having “the ‘schnapps’-bottle in the one hand, the whip in the other” (Jørgensen 2003, 127, my translation).

A Nazi soldier in charge of executions in Czechoslovakia explains that the double rations of alcohol were intended for the strain on their nerves. They also received bonus pay for being in the shooting commandos. For 12 days, the man explains, he only shot Jews: “At first you said, great, better than doing normal duty, but after a couple of days you would have preferred normal duty. It took a toll on your nerves. Then you just gritted your teeth and at some point you didn’t care!” (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 126–127).

The so-called Hoecker album, which includes photographs of parties at a SS-retreat (“Solahütte”) provides us with a window into the
bizarre world of the Nazi perpetrators’ social lives during the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{34} Very little about the pictures gives away the horrific context. On the contrary, they resemble perfectly ordinary and timeless photos, happy holiday pictures. Women sun-tan on canvas chairs on the deck of a mountain cabin (pictures 7-9); they are later shown posing with blueberry pies (pictures 73-75); sing-alongs are accompanied by accordion music (pictures 10-12 and 42). Except for the uniforms to a knowledgeable eye, nothing else indicates that these are Nazi guards, administrators, and auxiliary personnel of the Auschwitz/Birkenau/Buna facilities. Taken in the summer and fall of 1944—in the same period that almost half a million Hungarian Jews were gassed immediately upon arrival to Auschwitz-Birkenau—the photos are of young people enjoying themselves.\textsuperscript{35}

A similarly festive atmosphere surrounded the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. Alphonse—a male Hutu perpetrator cited in Jean Hatzfeld’s book \textit{Machete Season}—describes a big party in the village on the evening after the first massacre. Cows were slaughtered, people sang and chatted, and fired guns in their joy: “It was the most terrific celebration” (Hatzfeld 2005, 93). Jean-Baptiste explains that friends typically met in the local bar in the evenings to rest and relax after a long day of work—a euphemistic expression for the killings. Here they would drink, joke around and enjoy themselves. \textit{Machete Season} is full of testimonies that describe the role that heavy drinking played in the genocide. Like many other perpetrators whom we encountered in this section, Jean Baptiste explains that he had trouble killing his first victim. He was not able to kill him properly and as a result, the man was alive and kept moving for two long hours. After leaving the crime site, Jean Baptiste picks up a drink to soothe his nerves. Later on,

\textsuperscript{34} Full access to the album is available through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s homepage (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2015). The album is thought to have been created by SS-Obersturmführer Karl Höcker (adjutant to the commandant of Auschwitz, SS-Sturmbannführer Richard Baer). Höcker was stationed at Auschwitz from May 1944 until the evacuation of the camp in January 1945.\textsuperscript{35} Interestingly, another set of the rare photographic documentation of Auschwitz comes from the same time period. The famous “Auschwitz-album” uniquely documents the arrival and selection process of the Hungarian Jews in Birkenau (The album is available at Yad Vashem’s webpage 2015).
he explains, he got used to killing without so much dodging around (Hatzfeld 2005, 23). Another perpetrator explains that some people had to be calmed down with alcohol or else they would turn ugly even to those around them (Hatzfeld 2005, 49).

In the opening scene of the documentary *The Act of Killing*, former gangster and mass murder Anwar Congo dances around a former killing site and explains that he would always go out and party after a round of executions. Alcohol, drugs and music would make him relax and feel good and free. In those good old days, “it was like we were killing happily”, he explains. He proudly shows us the efficient killing technique he developed to murder his victims. As the killings tended to be bloody and smell, he began to strangle his victims with a wire. Explaining that he and his fellow executioners were inspired by the violence in American Western and gangster movies, he brags that he and his fellow gangsters were in fact much more brutal (Oppenheimer 2012).

Following a failed military coup in Indonesia in 1965, Anwar Congo and other gangsters helped the Indonesian military and police with the persecution, torture and execution of more than half a million alleged communists and Chinese. There has never been a criminal investigation of these massacres. Instead the perpetrators are considered national heroes. In the course of the film, the perpetrators engage in artistic re-enactments of the torture and killings they carried out in the 60s. Simultaneously, the men are interviewed about their feelings and experiences both at the time of the killings and in the course of filming. The result is a rare perspective of the perpetrator’s self-understanding of himself and his crimes. Congo may have been happy and easy going during the killings forty years earlier, but the process of revisiting the past stirs up troubling memories.

Congo is suddenly revolted while showing the crew around the site of killings where he was dancing in the beginning of the movie. It happens as he explains how they murdered the alleged communists. He adds that at the time he knew it was wrong, but he had to do it anyway. Managing to
compose himself, Congo explains further how he murdered the people. Soon again, a new wave of revulsion overcomes him and he is forced to sit down. He spits on the ground, then sits down on a bench and says, “Why did I have to kill them? I had to kill...[pause]. My conscience told me they had to be killed. This is [he lifts up the wire they used to strangle their victims with] one of the easiest ways to take a human life. And this [he lifts up a sack] was used to take away [he pauses briefly and seems to gag] the human beings we killed. Because without this maybe people would know.” Again, revulsion and vomiting reflexes overwhelm him.

Throughout the movie, Congo does not express remorse or guilt. On the contrary, he seems proud of his actions. On several occasions he does, however, give a detailed account of the recurring nightmares in which the memory of his victims haunts him. Convinced that his victims have become ghosts because they died unnatural deaths, Congo explains that “the ghosts hate me” and wonders if the nightmares are a form of vengeance of the dead. One especially brutal killing keeps tormenting him. Congo had cut down a man with a machete, and left him on the ground without closing his eyes. Those empty staring eyes haunt him: “Why didn’t I close his eyes?” he keeps asking himself.

Congo’s friend and fellow mass murderer, Adi Zulkadry assures him that his discomfort is just a result of nerve disturbances that a psychologist can help. “Killing is the worst crime you can do,” Zulkadry says, “so you have to find the right excuse, the right compensation...the key is not to feel guilty”. Zulkadry says he has never had nightmares or struggled with guilt. He justifies his gruesome acts by telling himself that he was in war, and that war is always gruesome. The similarity between the Nazi understanding of the phenomenon is striking: signs of perpetrator disgust are merely a psychological or physiological problems to be overcome.

Congo seems to struggle with this, and the filming of the movie places him in unusual situations. During one of the reenactments, Congo plays a communist who is being tortured by men dressed up as American
gangsters. They yell at him and ask him to confess. Suddenly Congo feels uncomfortable. He breathes heavily and asks for water. They continue with the scene and reenact how the victim, played by Congo, is being strangled with a wire. Afterwards Congo’s hand is shaking. He says, “I can’t do that again”. He closes his eyes and shakes his head. Later, while reviewing some of the film’s footage with director Joshua Oppenheimer, Congo is excited to show his grandchildren the scene in question. He seems to enjoy the moment and then grows suddenly concerned. Just before the scene shows the execution by strangulation, he instructs his grandchildren to leave the room. He says to Oppenheimer, “I can feel what the people felt, all the terror”. Oppenheimer quietly but firmly suggests that it was different for the victims. For them, it was not an act. “But I can feel it,” Congo says, “...or have I sinned?”

Clearly, though unrepentant, Congo is affected by the confrontations with his past. His emotional turmoil is both caused and documented by the production of the documentary. The last scene of the movie—in which Congo experiences revulsion—is also the last scene Oppenheimer shot with Congo. Oppenheimer interprets Congo’s disgust as his body’s rejection of the crimes he committed. Throughout the project of the film, Congo has been dedicated to making a beautiful Hollywood movie about the crimes he committed. One grandiose scene, for example, captures Congo in the middle of a waterfall with beautiful female dancers. Like some Messiah, he greets his victims who come to thank him for sending them to heaven. Oppenheimer believes that, towards the end of the film’s production, Congo is realizing that you can’t create a picture of mass murder that is both beautiful and real. Oppenheimer finds that this is a cause for hope that Congo feels sick in the confrontation with the ugly truth about his crimes (Romer 2012). It is doubtful that Congo is undergoing a complete moral transformation with feelings of regret and remorse, but he is still not able to reckon with his deeds. He feels literally sick when he confronts the crimes he perpetrated and there
is good reason to believe that his physical and psychological responses are a sign of moral conflict.

Congo is not the only example of a perpetrator who feels disgust after the crimes have been committed. A recent example that has received much media coverage has been the case of the South African runner, Oscar Pistorius, who cried and vomited in court when confronted with the graphic details of the injuries sustained by the girlfriend whom he shot and killed. The incident gave rise to much discussion about the significance of the disgust response. Some believe that his physical repugnance sustains the defense’s claim that Pistorius is traumatized by the event because he thought his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, was an intruder and that he shot her in an act of self-defense. Others believe that Pistorius’ continuous vomiting should be seen as a strategic maneuver. The South African satirical news site Banana Newsline—similar to the American Onion and the Danish Rokkoposten—ran a story that suggested Pistorius had vomited simply because he had overeaten at a local restaurant.

Another South-African, the notorious Eugene de Kock, commanding officer of the apartheid death squads, also experienced perpetrator disgust years after killing actions. Psychologist and member of the Human Rights Violation Committee in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela reports that, during the retelling of the episode, de Kock’s “facial muscles contorted; it was as if he were expressing revulsion at something he was re-experiencing” (Gobodo-Madikizela 2006, 51). De Kock—nicknamed “prime evil” by his own men and sentenced to 212 years for crimes against humanity—recalls feeling increasingly uncomfortable as he was driving home from a routine killing mission against the African National Congress’s armed wing. He noticed an unbearable smell on his body, and ran straight to the shower upon arrival home. But the smell remained with him:
“It was like the taste of metal in the mouth – the smell of blood all over my body. I couldn’t get it off.” His gestures had become extreme; he motioned in an exaggerated way, his eyes bulging, pulling at his arms as if he were struggling to remove something attacking his flesh, something detachable from his skin. Finally, he towed off and waited. To no avail. The over-powering odor still clung. In all, he said, he ended up taking three or four more long showers, each time being careful to use a new towel. Unable to rid himself completely of the smell – the odor of death – he gathered the killing clothes into a plastic bag together with the first towel he had used and simply dumped them in the garbage bin (Gobodo-Madikizela 2006, 51).

When Gobodo-Madikizela hears the story and its impact on de Kock, she concludes that he is struggling with guilt and that, in this moment, he finally acknowledges the debt owed to his conscience. De Kock’s frantic obsession with the smell was a manifestation of his inner torment. She believes this process was “largely an unconscious process, the deeper roots of which were perhaps too hidden from consciousness to lead to any reflection and to effect any real change“ (Gobodo-Madikizela 2006, 71). That night De Kock lost his humanity as an executioner but, according to Gobodo-Madikizela, he regains it by his sincere expressions of remorse. For all the gruesome crimes he committed, de Kock “was a desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe” (Gobodo-Madikizela 2006, 47). In the spirit of the principles of restorative justice, Gobodo-Madikizela believes we should embrace this request and re-humanize perpetrators like de Kock.

The examples of perpetrator disgust that occur at some distance from the crimes pose a further challenge to the non-moral interpretations that I have considered. Without blood or disgusting smells and sights, we are compelled to acknowledge the disgust as more than merely aesthetic, and indicative of some moral, psychological, or emotional turmoil in the
perpetrator. Every case is of course different, and it may be argued that the perpetrator is merely recalling the disgusting nature of the killings. In the cases of Congo and de Kock, however, it seems more credible to conclude that their disgust reflects an inner conflict. Still, it is premature to follow Gobodo-Madikizela’s argument that the physical and emotional disgust is proof of sincere remorse or guilt. Oppenheimer’s weak version of the habituation interpretation is more compelling: the perpetrator’s body may be rejecting what he has done, but this does not mean that the perpetrator consciously condemns his crimes. In an interview after Congo watched *The Act of Killing* for the first time, he declared that he does not feel guilty (Syarina 2012). Congo’s visceral response of perpetrator disgust may be a sign of moral conflict, but it does not reflect an actual moral judgment.
Conclusions to section one

I have now considered how scholars from history, sociology, philosophy and psychology have conceptualized perpetrator disgust. Fundamentally different interpretations of the phenomenon have emerged, with particular disagreements on the intentional object of the disgust—and whether an intentional object exists at all. The nativist and habituation interpretations agree that the perpetrator’s physical and emotional breakdown is rooted in a moral conflict. Non-moral interpretations argue that the perpetrator feels sick at the mere gruesomeness of the killing scene.

On another level, the different interpretations operate on fundamentally different conceptions of disgust and their relationship to human morality. Nativist interpretations argue that disgust is a deep-seated moral instinct and non-moral interpretations dismiss a moral component entirely, while habituation interpretations fall somewhere between these two poles and argue for an understanding of disgust as a product of socialization.

The core of the disagreement concerns not only the moral qualities we should ascribe to uncontrollable, visceral bodily responses of distress, discomfort and disgust. Rather, the issue is a fundamental disagreement about what constitutes a moral quality. To Baumeister and his colleagues, mere visceral responses cannot qualify as moral, as a moral quality must be accompanied by conscious feelings and emotions. Similar assumptions are at play in the positions of Goldhagen and Welzer’s non-moral interpretations. To scholars like Glover, Arendt, Browning, and especially Bauman, involuntary visceral disgust responses can signify a moral rejection, but few nativists go as far as Gobodo-Madikizela to call the disgust response itself a sign of remorse.

The differences in the interpretations should also be attributed to the variety of perpetrator disgust that I have discussed. Again, any assessment of a particular case necessarily involves an interpretation, but from a distance we can now perceive a spectrum of cases that stretch from cases of non-moral
disgust to those where the disgust is accompanied by explicit guilt feelings and recognition of the wrongness of the acts. In between these two extremes, we find different cases where the disgust points to unconscious moral conflict, and other combinations and complex mix of emotions—such as self-pity and sadism—that can grow out of perpetrator disgust.

In the next section, I take a step back from the analysis of the interpretations of perpetrator disgust to evaluate the philosophical assumptions that underlie these interpretations. I compare the debate on perpetrator disgust with contemporary debates in philosophy and psychology on the moral nature of disgust and vicarious distress, and consider the normative questions these discussions raise: Can such bodily responses be trusted to reflect sound moral perceptions? And what motivational force lies behind them after all? The task will be to identify the proper role of visceral responses in moral judgment.
Section II

Moral Conceptions of Disgust and Vicarious Distress
The Moral Potential of Disgust

Introduction

A central shared characteristic in the cases that we have discussed so far is the feeling of disgust. The soldiers feel nausea and vomit, and sometimes explicitly say that they felt disgust. As we heard in the previous section, scholars and the perpetrators themselves often interpret this disgust response as a sign that the perpetrator understands the moral wrongness of his actions. In this chapter I set out to explore the validity of these intuitions.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, I explore how disgust responses can come to represent a sense of right and wrong. My focus is on the recent upsurge of research on disgust in psychology and philosophy. Second, I narrow my focus to the normative discussions within these fields, on the extent to which we can rely on our disgust responses as moral guides. This debate shares some fundamental similarities with the debate on the moral nature of perpetrator disgust that I presented in the previous section. Much like the nativists, disgust advocates argue that disgust responses reflect a biological and natural moral wisdom that we are unable to grasp rationally. Disgust skeptics, on the other hand, hold a position somewhat similar to the non-moral interpretations of perpetrator disgust and argue that disgust responses are either amoral or non-moral, but are no good guide to moral action. As an alternative to these two mutually exclusive models, and inspired by Immanuel Kant and Aurel Kolnai’s conception of disgust, I argue that feelings of disgust may serve an important signaling function to the human sense of morality, because they compel us to stop and reflect. Disgust may both promote and distort moral perception. We therefore need to always evaluate the legitimacy of our disgust.\(^{37}\)

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\(^{36}\) I borrow the terminology of disgust advocates and disgust skeptics from Kelly 2011, chap. 5.

\(^{37}\) I have presented an earlier version of this argument in Munch-Jurisic 2014.
What is disgust?

The sight and smell of a carton of rotten eggs may cause a person to gag or vomit. Researchers agree on calling this core disgust or basic disgust. It is the disgust we feel at rotting or decaying objects, feces, and other bodily waste. Although disgust responses have a reflex-like character, they are also cognitively complex. We learn what to feel disgust for and we also feel an involuntary disgust response for violations of certain social and moral codes. Most people feel physical disgust when they hear of sexual acts that they consider morally wrong, as with incest or sexual violence. Disgust responses, in other words, are not just reflexes, they have an intentional object; they are about something.38

The difficulty, however, is that it is not always possible to determine the intentional object of a disgust response merely by relying on the physical characteristic of the response. If we see someone vomiting, we have no way of determining whether they are merely sick or experiencing core, social or moral disgust. Before we proceed, some caution is therefore needed. Some examples of perpetrator disgust may not qualify as disgust responses, because the physical responses are merely caused by a virus, for example. Moreover, even when we believe there is good reason to interpret the perpetrator’s bodily response as disgust, it remains an open question what the perpetrator’s disgust is directed at: is it moral disgust at the act or core disgust over the gore?

For many years disgust was a neglected and understudied emotion because it was misconceived as mere distaste or food-aversion. This is no longer the case. In recent years, as Nina Strohminger puts it, disgust is “the unlikely, academic star of our time. In just a few years it has gone from

38 I will discuss the specific form of this intentionality much more in the final chapter of the dissertation.
black sheep to hot topic” (Strohminger 2014b, 478). In 2013, more than 400 academic publications were published with the keyword “disgust” while the annual average until 1983 was less than one paper per year. From the 1990s the number of publications started to rise, reaching 50 in 1998, 200 in 2007 and over 350 in 2011 (Strohminger 2014b, 479). See figure 2.

On this occasion, I do not intend to give a complete review of this relatively new and diverse area of research that stretches from philosophy and psychology to cultural studies, anthropology and the health sciences.40

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39 The figure “shows number of publications with the keyword ‘disgust’ 1941–2013. Data is from ISIWeb of Knowledge, retrieved April 2013, and is inclusive of publications in all fields. Striped bar represents end of year projection. The figure starts at the year when the first modern psychological account of disgust was published (Angyal, 1941)” (Strohminger 2014b, 479).

40 For such a literature review I recommend the first chapter in Kelly 2011 and Strohminger 2014. Closely related to the discussion of the social value of disgust is Mary Douglas’ anthropological study of purity’s relationship to danger and Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical
Instead I focus on the competing theories of the defining characteristics of
disgust, primarily in philosophy and psychology, before returning to the
discussion of the moral value of disgust.

For a long time, the primary reference point in disgust research
was Rozin’s idea that disgust is an aversion to food that is contaminated, and
that disgust is therefore primarily mouth-related. In this conception, core
disgust is revulsion at the prospect of oral incorporation of an offensive object
(Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2008, 108ff). Rozin builds his theory from an
early, explorative essay by the psychiatrist Andras Angyal (Angyal 1941). 14
years earlier, however, one of Angyal’s Vienna contemporaries, the
philosopher and phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai argued that the primary sense
that discovers disgust is the olfactory sense and that the prototypical object of
disgust is therefore something that offends our sense of smell (Kolnai 2004,
53). Lately, scholars have used some of the main ideas in Kolnai’s essay to
challenge Rozin’s interpretation. In his cultural history of disgust, William
Miller suggests that disgust is primarily related to touch and smell (W. I.
Miller 1997). Philosopher Colin McGinn argues that disgust is mainly about
decay and putrefaction; what disgusts us is death in the context of life
(McGinn 2011, 88).41

More promisingly and on the basis of empirical studies,
philosopher Daniel Kelly argues for a model in which disgust has not just one,
but two primary functions: to avoid the ingestion of food that can poison us,
and to reject objects that can contaminate us and make us sick. Kelly believes
the disagreements about the characteristic of disgust arise because scholars
have different theories about its evolutionary origins. One group of scholars

concept of abject (Douglas 2004; Kristeva 1982). See also Sara Ahmed’s study on the political
function of disgust (Ahmed 2014).
41 This list far from exhausts the recent (and rapidly increasing) research on disgust. On the
basis of evolutionary psychology, for example, Tybur and his colleagues have recently
challenged Rozin’s account of disgust. They argue that disgust originates from three domains:
pathogen avoidance, sexual choice and moral judgment (Tybur et al. 2013). While giving a
comprehensive review of the recent developments in the research on disgust, Nina
Strohminger also convincingly argues that disgust has no core, but instead should be
conceived as a “psychological nebula” without definite boundaries, a discrete internal
structure or a single center of gravity (Strohminger 2014b, 480; Strohminger 2014a).
claims that disgust is a uniquely human emotion. Rozin, for example, points to the highly cognitive and symbolic features of disgust: though disgust was originally based on a primitive food-rejection system, it has now become a complex emotional response used to repress reminders of our animal origins and our own mortality (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2008, 759). Other scholars reject the idea of disgust as a distinctly human response. They point to the similarities in disgust-reactions (e.g. the gape face) and food aversions of other primates, to whom disgust also serves to monitor and regulate food intake and protect against toxins (Kelly 2011, 44).

As an alternative to both of these theories, Kelly presents an “entanglement thesis”, making the case that disgust consists of “two distinguishable cognitive mechanisms that were once distinct but became functionally integrated—entangled with each other—in the cognitive architecture of modern human beings”(Kelly 2011, 45). While other primates exhibit versions of these mechanisms, only in humans did these entangle to form the unique emotion of disgust.

The food-avoidance mechanism, also called the distaste response, causes us to develop aversions to food that made us sick. Even before our ancestors had developed a sophisticated language, they could warn their peers of the potential danger of eating certain foods by mimicking retching. The gape face communicated vital information.

The disease-avoidance mechanism—the reflex-like impulse to quickly move away from the offending entity—also functions in animals as well as humans. We see it in hygienic behaviors that minimize the likelihood of infections. Furthermore, this mechanism ensures that we are sensitive to signs of potential diseases in our proximate environment, e.g. the smell of rot and decay, physical signs of sickness (sneezing, coughing, itching, swelling,

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43 See Tybur et al. 2013 for a more detailed account of this position.
44 A variation of this mechanism has been researched as the “Garcia-effect” (or the "Sauce Bearnaise effect"). Consult the work of psychologists John Garcia and Martin Seligman (Garcia and Koelling 1966; Garcia, Ervin, and Koelling 1966; Seligman and Hager 1972).
sweating), and are alert to approaching too close to any object, person or situation that may infect us.

Kelly argues that these two distinct ancient mechanisms eventually became so integrated “to the point where activation of one automatically brought about the activation of the other. This resulted in the formation of the cluster of elements that make up what we now recognize as the disgust response” (Kelly 2011, 53). The gape face proved to be a great tool for transmitting important information, and humans expanded this food-aversion response to include disease-aversion. At some point, the simulation of retching came to signal more than “This food will make you sick!”. It also came to say: “Danger, don’t eat and don’t approach this!” People were sensitive to each other’s expressions of disgust, and this was a highly effective way to help each other navigate potential dangers in the world. Soon, the gape face would also be used to express dislike or condemnation of social and moral matters.

The acquisition of disgust

The disgust response may have developed through mechanisms that protected us against poisons and diseases, but in today’s world it serves a much wider purpose. We are born with a basic distaste response—neonatal infants react to bitter and sour flavors with aversive gapes and grimaces. They wrinkle their nose, frown their eyebrows, and curl their lips. They flap their arms and shake their head (Berridge 2000, 174). While this distaste response is a mere reflex, a proper disgust response is a product of learning and does not develop until the age of two or three. Parents teach their children the hygienic necessity of rejecting core disgust objects (feces, vomit, snot etc.), but already in kindergarten some children pick up on the more symbolic meaning and

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45 J.E. Steiner and colleagues performed the original experiments in the 1970s (Steiner 1973; Steiner 1979). More recently, Berridge and colleagues have shown that mammals are born with the same distaste response (Berridge 2000).
function of disgust. They begin to display an understanding of its use to condemn social and moral violations.

Studies in developmental psychology show that, already as one-year-olds, some babies are sensitive to expressions of disgust by the adults around them. This sensitivity quickly increases in the first quarter of their second year (Hertenstein and Campos 2004). Children do not, however, explicitly reject an object as disgusting until the age of two or three. In one of Rozin’s famous “dog poop-experiments”, more than half of the children from 16-29 months happily accepted the offer of a very real looking and smelling “doggie doo” consisting of peanut butter, limburger cheese and blue cheese. The vast majority of two to three year olds refused, with only 12% accepting the offer (Rozin et al. 1986).

Around the time when children start going to school, some also begin to associate socio-moral transgressions with disgust. Judith Danovitch and Paul Bloom found that 30-40% of kindergarten aged children (around the age of six) described immoral actions as “disgusting” and 50-70% of the fourth graders made the same assessment. The children associated their judgment of something as morally disgusting with a picture of the disgust face (Danovitch and Bloom 2009, 110). Nonetheless, the children in the experiments primarily associated disgust with physically disgusting acts and not immoral acts, and not all children applied disgust language to moral questions. At this stage in their development children exhibit a firm sense of what core disgust objects are (for example feces and vomit), but their understanding of moral and social disgust is still developing.

Other studies show that children at this stage (four to nine year olds) primarily understand expressions of disgust as anger. In a set of experiments conducted by Sherri Widen and James Russell, only four out of 84 children understood a disgust face as a consequence of disgust, whereas 63 labeled a disgust face as anger. There was no significant difference between the responses of four year olds and nine year olds. In other words, young children do not seem to have a firm understanding of the concept of disgust,
nor its expression. The researchers suggest that children start out with very broad “scripts” or categories for emotions. In the beginning they only differentiate between positive and negative emotions. All negative emotions, including disgust, are therefore understood as anger. Finer distinctions are eventually made, as children start differentiating between emotions like sadness and fear, or surprise. Disgust and anger, however, remain conflated for a much longer period of time and cause the children in the experiment to fail to assign the proper label to the disgust face (Widen and Russell 2010, 463–464).

To sum up, we are born with distaste and gag reflexes, but our capacity to recognize even core disgust objects is only acquired through learning and socialization. As children develop towards maturity, they simulate their surroundings and eventually begin to direct the language of disgust to social and moral violations. There is some indication that moral disgust eventually becomes as or more important than core disgust. Maureen O’Sullivan and Paul Ekman asked American college students to “write down the most intense experience of disgust they could imagine anyone in the world would ever have had” (Ekman 2003, 199). Most of the answers (62%) expressed disgust for morally objectionable behavior, e.g. how the allied forces must have felt when they discovered the horror in Nazi concentration and death camps, or how it would feel to witness an act of pedophilia (Ekman 2003, 199–200).

In a similar experiment Rozin and his colleagues also found prevalence of socio-moral disgust. They asked American and Japanese university students to list three events in which they felt disgust; 61 percent of the Japanese responses and 70 percent of the American responses dealt with socio-moral disgust. Only one quarter of the responses in both samples dealt with core disgust (Haidt et al. 1997, 118). The socio-moral disgust of the Americans was mainly directed at others—especially toward people who violate the basic dignity of other human beings, as in cruel and senseless violence against weak or defenseless people. Examples included Serbian
atrocities, a recent Chicago mass murder, children who tease homeless people, and “a father who shook his child to death because he didn’t like something that he saw during a football game” (Haidt et al. 1997, 118). The Japanese primarily referred to examples of self-disgust, situations of unsuccessful social interactions, or those in which they felt humiliated or ashamed. The authors conclude that socio-moral disgust is linked to core disgust across cultures, but that “the kinds of social issues linked to disgust may be quite variable” (Haidt et al. 1997, 121). In other words, the use of disgust as an “embodied schemata” in moral and social life seems to be a universal psychological and cultural process, but very different objects can potentially elicit disgust (Haidt et al. 1997, 125).

Socio-moral disgust should not be treated as just a metaphoric quirk of the English language, as some scholars have argued. Rozin’s cross-culture studies demonstrate that many cultures link core disgust with socio-moral disgust under the same word. Aside from Japan, the researchers point to the concept of “miasma” in Ancient Greece and the concept of “tiyoyaeiwai” among the Hopi people in Arizona. For the Ancient Greeks “miasma” could mean that an object was contagious, dangerous, or that someone became ritually impure. The paradigmatic cases of the latter were murder or contact with a corpse. The Hopis used “tiyoyaeiwai” to refer to examples of incest, the sight of a dead body, disregard for the environment or any kind of aggression, reporting that they felt sick or nauseous at the same time (Haidt et al. 1997, 118–120). Borrowing from Lakoff and Johnson’s argument in *Metaphors We Live By* (1981), the authors argue that our conception of socio-moral disgust would be impossible without our bodily experiences of core disgust. Or, as Haidt has it, disgust can be “easily cued [...] or applied metaphorically [...] to other domains” (Haidt et al. 1997, 123).
Disgust advocates and disgust skeptics

We have so far found general consensus that disgust can represent our moral judgments. The main disagreements arise when we address the normative implications of disgust, that is, whether disgust can be considered a reliable source in justifying our moral judgments.

For so-called disgust advocates disgust responses are an essential part of our understanding of some violations as moral violations. As William Ian Miller, puts it eloquently: “Disgust deals with harms that sicken us in the telling, things for which there could be no plausible claim of right: rape, child abuse, torture, genocide, predatory murder and maiming” (W. I. Miller 1997, 36). Even when we use disgust only as a verbal expression (as a mode of speech, independently of the feeling) we are emphatically pointing to a set of norms that we firmly believe should hold us in their grip (W. I. Miller 1997, 194). When disgust functions as an idiom in this way, it “pledges it as security to make our words something more than mere words” (W. I. Miller 1997, 181).

The disgust response can therefore “enhance an intuition’s strength, clarity, and justificatory force” (Audi 2013, 153). This is the case when for example a physician feels emotional revulsion and distress at the thought of force-feeding a dying patient:

The emotional revulsion and the distressing intuition are unified as responses to the same perceptions and thoughts. In a way, they may be mutually reinforcing. Each is a response to the same pattern that justifies the negative judgment in the intuition (Audi 2013, 153).

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46 Inspired by Miller’s account of moral disgust, Dan Kahan spells out a similar position with regard to legal matters (Kahan 1999).
47 For more on the role disgust plays for our moral perception, see for example Miller 1997, 36, 194 and Audi 2013, 153. We will return to this point at the end of the chapter.
The argument is that the feeling of revulsion can contribute to the evidential force of a moral judgment.

Some conservative thinkers take this argumentation a step further and argue that the powerful and inescapable nature of disgust reflects a biological and natural wisdom that we are unable to grasp rationally. They argue that disgust is a morally attuned emotion that gives us insight into the activities and social practices that we should consider unnatural (McGinn 2011, 129; Kass 1997). One of the most radical disgust advocates, Leon Kass—a conservative bioethicist who was a member of President Bush’s Counsel on Bioethics—advocates for the “the wisdom of repugnance” and against practices like human cloning and stem cell research. To Kass, repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom—a wisdom that we cannot fully articulate through reason:

In this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, and in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational will, repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder (Kass 1997).

Another disgust advocate, Colin McGinn, takes the view that disgust is nature’s way of trying to rein in inappropriate desires (McGinn 2011, 129).

While it is undeniable that disgust serves a policing function—it plays a crucial role in civilizing us as proper human beings and in managing our excessive tendencies—the specific content of this policing function is never simply dictated by nature (Kelly 2011, chap. 4). Even in core disgust and especially in examples of social and moral disgust, societal norms and values shape our understanding of disgusting objects and acts. If an individual is

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48 Recently, some philosophers have argued that liberals can also assume the position of the disgust advocate (Besong 2014; Plakias 2012; Clark and Fessler 2014).
disgusted by interracial or homosexual relationships, this does not tell us that
nature as such disapproves of homosexuality. Instead such a response tells us
something about the specific moral and political values that this individual
has internalized.

Once we have internalized disgust toward something as an
embodied automatic response, this habit of the body is difficult to get rid of.
To put it differently, a visceral disgust response towards a certain object or act
can remain even though we no longer consider it morally objectionable. If
one, for example, grows up in a culture where homosexual relations are
considered disgusting and this belief is internalized into an embodied disgust
response, this individual is likely to continue to feel such disgust long after he
has changed his mind about the morality of homosexuality. This is one of the
reasons why so-called disgust skeptics argue that we should not trust our
disgust impulses.

For Martha Nussbaum—one of the most prominent disgust
skeptics—disgust is an emotion that we should distrust. Her main argument,
which she has presented in several books and articles,\(^49\) is that references to
disgust should never play a determining role in legal judgment. She points to
the way references to disgust have been used to justify homophobia,
misogyny, racism, and other forms of social injustice. The perspective of “he,
she, or that is disgusting” does not offer us anything constructive. On the
contrary, Nussbaum argues that such argumentation is a dangerous path that
leads to a condemnation of other people and excludes difference from human
society. Instead she calls for “a society that acknowledges its own humanity,
and neither hides us from it nor it from us” (Nussbaum 2010, 17).

While Nussbaum is primarily concerned with a legal discourse,
her argument also pertains to the more general normative question of the
appropriateness of drawing normative conclusions from disgust reactions.
She is concerned with what she calls projective disgust—a subcategory of what
I have until now called social and moral disgust—which societies use to

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\(^49\) See for example Nussbaum 1999; Nussbaum 2004; Nussbaum 2010; Nussbaum 2012.
ostracize a certain group of people by falsely linking them to objects of core
disgust. For example the claim of racists that certain groups of people smell.
As Nussbaum demonstrates, throughout the history of humankind, projective
disgust has served as a very efficient tool to secure politics of subordination
(Nussbaum 2010, 21ff.).

Daniel Kelly agrees with Nussbaum that disgust has no role to
play in moral reasoning and has recently drawn the radical conclusion that
the world would be a better place without disgust (Kelly and Morar 2014,
176–177). At the same time, he criticizes Nussbaum’s explanatory model for
being too simple, and offers an alternative. Disgust does not merely project
anxiety onto others (as Nussbaum argues), nor does it provide any deep
wisdom about the alleged naturalness of certain practices (as Kass and
McGinn argues), Rather, disgust is unreliable as a moral emotion, because of
its nature and evolutionary history. As I discussed earlier, Kelly argues that
disgust is a defense mechanism against toxins and diseases that, through
evolution, has came to play many different roles and functions beyond the
original purpose. But although disgust acquired these new social and moral
functions, it kept its old features. The intentional objects of disgust (i.e. the
disgust elicitor) are “intuitively experienced and conceptualized as if they
were revolting, dirty, impure and contaminating” (Kelly and Morar 2014,
157). As a result, disgust has a conspicuous tendency to distort and misguide
our moral judgments.

The disgust skeptic’s charge of disgust as distorting finds support
in a range of psychological experiments, which demonstrate that disgust can
affect and manipulate moral judgment. People tend to judge cases of moral
dilemma harsher when they were simultaneously presented with a disgusting
experience (Schnall et al. 2008, 1107). To take just one example, people who
were exposed to a noxious ambient odor reported less warmth toward gay
men (Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom 2012).
The disgust of perpetrators

By now it is clear that the arguments of the disgust advocates align with nativist interpretations of perpetrator disgust as a deep-seated, natural and instinctual wisdom. But this conception of disgust is problematic. It is true that we are all born with the capacity to feel disgust in the form of the distaste and withdrawal reflex, and that this capacity is “animalistic” in the sense that we share it with many other mammals (Tybur et al. 2013). But for both animals and humans, a full-grown disgust response (i.e. something more than the distaste reflex) is based on learning and conditioning. We learn and internalize disgust responses until they eventually become second nature—an embodied reflex-like response beyond our control.

On the other hand, disgust skeptics offer an understanding of disgust that is similar to non-moral interpretations of perpetrator disgust. As the skeptics insist that disgust has no legitimate role in moral reasoning, they would presumably regard the instances of perpetrator disgust as entirely irrelevant to the moral domain. This, too, is problematic. As the example of the members of Battalion 101 shows, it seems plausible that disgust does contain positive moral possibilities. Had these men taken their emotional reactions—their disgust and aversion—more seriously, they may have reflected upon the meaning and significance of their emotional and physical reactions, and found that they point to a moral transgression. Habituation interpretations, which regard perpetrator’s disgust as a product of socialization, offer the most compelling understanding of disgust responses as spontaneous, involuntary signs of the hygienic, social and moral values that we grow to adopt.

Despite the shortcomings of non-moral interpretations of perpetrator disgust, we should take seriously the skeptic’s charge of disgust as distortive. We face several complications in tying moral conflict to instances of perpetrator disgust:

First of all, as already noted, the bodily response in disgust is the same for both core, social and moral disgust, and it is an inherently open
question whether a specific case of perpetrator disgust is a sign of moral
disgust or mere core disgust at the gore of a murder scene. Moreover and
more importantly, the perpetrator may experience a sort of “double disgust”,
both moral disgust over the atrocities themselves and also core disgust over
the disfigured state of the victim (W. I. Miller 1997, 196).

Second, we know that the risk of soldiers’ aversions to killing
actions (whatever its moral or non-moral nature) pushes most perpetrator
organizations that participate in genocidal violence to invent cleaner killing
methods. Recall that Anwar Congo explains how he developed a more
efficient killing method (strangulation by wire) that would spare him and his
fellow gangsters the cleanup of blood, and that he was after that “killing
happily”, aided by drugs, etc. In the case of Police Battalion 101, commanders
reorganized the killing actions after realizing that “the work” (another
euphemism) was too emotionally draining for the soldiers. They brought in
Trawnikis (SS-trained inmates from POW camps) to carry out the killings, so
that the reservists in the Police Battalion would round up the Jewish victims
but not be directly involved in the shooting actions (Browning 1998, 75–76).

Third, the perpetrators may also feel disgust over the victims
because they regard them as subhuman. This brings us to a central aspect of
the role of disgust in mass atrocities—which I have left untouched so far—
namely, the way that genocidal regimes use disgust to dehumanize their
victims. Typically, the regime justifies mass violence by referring to the
targeted out-group as worthy of elimination because of its disgusting and
non-human (i.e. non-dignified) status.50 Nazi propaganda compared Jews to
rats. The propaganda in the Rwandan genocide of 1994 continuously referred
to Tutsis as cockroaches. The biology professor and Bosnian Serb political
leader Biljana Plavsic referred to the Bosnian Muslim community as
“genetically deformed Serbs”.51 Greek torturers referred to their victims as
“worms” (Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros 1986).

50 See also the excellent analysis of these processes in Chirot and McCauley 2006.
51 Biljana Plavsic reflected upon this topic on several occasions, saying for example in a
newspaper article in Oslobodjenje, May 1994: “We are disturbed by the fact that the number
Moreover, the systematic development of camps and ghettos where victims are deprived not just of legal and political rights, but also of basic hygiene, reifies the propaganda that portrays the victims as sub-human. A dominant hypothesis in the psychology of genocide is that this dehumanizing treatment of the victims makes it easier for the perpetrators to justify the killings because they come to regard the victims as objects of disgust (Bandura 1999).\(^{52}\)

Franz Stangl, commander of the Treblinka death camp, seems to confirm this thesis with his admission that he saw the arriving Jews as “cargo”. He explains that he rarely saw the victims as individuals, because they always were a huge mass: “They were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips … This was the system … It worked” (Sereny 1988, 201–202). This dehumanizing conception of his victims was founded on his first confrontation with the so-called “Totenlager” (death warehouse) with its pits full of blue-back corpses. Here he concluded that what he saw was not humans, but “a mass of rotting flesh” and “garbage” that he and his colleagues needed to dispose of (Sereny 1988, 201).

Nonetheless, we may question whether this process of dehumanization is as totalizing and straightforward as scholars sometimes assume (Lang 2010). Stangl, for example, consciously avoids situations where he is reminded that the victims are human beings. For him, the worst place in the camp is the undressing barrack:

“I avoided it from my innermost being: I couldn’t confront them; I couldn’t lie to them; I avoided at any price talking to those who were about to die: I couldn’t stand it” (Sereny 1988, 203).

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\(^{52}\) A detailed account of this process goes beyond the scope of this chapter. See instead Hilberg 1961, chap. IV–VI and Staub 1992, chap. 8–9.
Stangl’s horror at the thought of facing the humanity of his victims also shows us that brutalization is not a linear process with a predetermined end-point. Even hardened perpetrators like Stangl are not monoliths of evil, and they are themselves aware that they can carry out their deeds only under certain conditions.53

It is therefore important not to conflate a perpetrator’s feelings of disgust and distress with a conscious moral condemnation. As philosopher of religion Robert Merrihew Adams points out, “One can easily find an action morally horrible even when one does not believe it to be wrong” (Adams 1999, 105). A soldier who takes a human life in a justified war may feel moral horror and self-disgust, but not conceive of his action as morally wrong. Similarly, a person who kills in self-defense may also be horrified at his act, but nonetheless find it justified. Many cases of perpetrator disgust seem to be marked by the same dynamic. The perpetrators may initially feel strong discomfort but this does not make them question the legitimacy of their actions. In other words, their automatic disgust response does not entail a moral condemnation or a principled opposition.

In what follows, I expand on this idea and present a normative conception of disgust that reconciles the gap between the disgust skeptics and the disgust advocates. I argue that disgust responses can provide us with a moral understanding of a situation, but that they do not necessarily provide us with a sound moral judgment. To make this argument, I find inspiration in Immanuel Kant and Aurel Kolnai’s conceptualizations of disgust and abhorrence. Here the central idea is that disgust response can be instrumental to moral or social perception, but that we cannot rely on the feeling itself when we determine whether a disgust response is appropriate or not; to make this assessment we rely entirely on critical reflection.

53 Consult also Primo Levi’s exemplary analysis in his essay on the grey zone (Levi 1988).
**Disgust as a stop sign**

Feelings of moral disgust play an important role in Kant’s moral system. Throughout his writings he remained intrigued and puzzled by the function that moral disgust has for our moral understanding. His treatment of the subject was never systematic, but scattered throughout his moral philosophical works and unpublished notes. When Kant refers to moral disgust, he primarily talks of abhorrence (“Abscheu”), whereas disgust (“Ekel”) primarily figures in relation to his discussions of aesthetic disgust. My focus here is therefore primarily on his use of abhorrence.

According to Kant, we need the capacity to feel abhorrence (“Verabscheuungsvermögen”) in order to determine what is evil. He explains this in a section of the *Critique of Practical Reason* where he is determining what can be an object of practical reason (Kant 1991, A 101). In Kant’s account, the capacity to desire something (“Begehrungsvermögen”) is necessary when we judge something to be good, and the capacity to feel abhorrence is necessary when we judge something to be evil. Unsurprisingly, Kant emphasizes that both of these capacities need to be considered in relation to a principle of reason.

For Kant, the capacity to desire something (“Begehrungsvermögen”) seems to be a version of the better-known moral feeling of respect (“Achtung”) for the moral law (Brandt 2007, 388). Both these feelings hold a unique position in Kant’s moral philosophy because they are central to moral perception, but not moral judgment. This is why Kant stresses that the concepts of good and evil do not precede the moral law—they are dependent upon it (Kant 1991, A 110). In this way he recognizes that the capacity to feel abhorrence can be a legitimate element in our moral judgment of evil, but only to the extent that this abhorrence is dependent upon and

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54 In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant also explores the mainly aesthetic concept of “Ekel” more broadly (for an introduction to this concept, see Menninghaus 2003, chap. 3). 55 If true, the feeling of abhorrence deserves as much scholarly attention as Kant’s conception of respect. On a different note, abhorrence may also be seen as a counter-emotion to the experience of the sublime (Menninghaus 2003, 117).
shaped by the rational moral law. Reason relies on the capacity to feel abhorrence when it judges something as evil, but it is reason itself that determines what should be considered abhorrent. In other words, it is not the emotions that determine my moral sense (as Hume would argue); it is the moral sense that in some instances causes me to react emotionally.

In several key texts, Kant acknowledges that feelings of abhorrence play a central role for our understanding of something as morally wrong or evil. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he states that we will feel an inner abhorrence and contempt for ourselves (“Selbstverachtung”) if we are not able to feel the proper respect (“Achtung”) for the moral law, (Kant 2008a, 426). The same point comes through in one of his unpublished notes (not intended for publication) where he contrasts the feeling of abhorrence with other emotions: we feel annoyed by our awkwardness, ashamed of our imprudence, but abhorred by our immorality. In another unpublished note, Kant goes as far as stating that: “All evil action would not happen at all, if, through the moral feeling as much abhorrence was felt as the action merited” (Kant 2008b, 85). In other words, the capacity to feel abhorrence—when shaped by reason—can make us abstain from committing evil acts.

We find the same idea in one of his last works, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant writes that feelings of aversion are the way we feel the efficacy (“Wirksamkeit”) of the moral law. These feelings are subjective experiences of the moral law:

56 The full German quote in context: “Hier soll sie ihre Lauterkeit beweisen als Selbhalterin ihrer Gesetze, nicht als Herold derjenigen, welche ihr ein eingepflanzer Sinn, oder wer weiß welche vormundschaftliche Natur einflüstert, die insgesammt, sie möchten immer besser sein als gar nichts, doch niemals Grundsätze abgeben können, die die Vernunft dictirt, und die durchaus völlig a priori ihren Quell und hiemit zugleich ihr gebietendes Ansehen haben müssen: nichts von der Neigung des Menschen, sondern alles von der Obergewalt des Gesetzes und der schuldigen Achtung für dasselbe zu erwarten, oder den Menschen widrigenfalls zur Selbstverachtung und innern Abscheu zu verurtheilen” (Kant 2008a, 425–426).

57 In German: “Man ärgert sich über seine Ungeschicklichkeit; man schämt sich seiner Unklugheit; man verabscheut sich wegen seiner Unsittlichkeit (Kant 2008c, 173).

58 The English quote is my translation with help from Alice Christensen. The German quote reads: “Alle böse Handlung wenn sie durch das moralische Gefühl mit so viel Abscheu empfunden würde als sie werth ist würde garnicht geschehen” (Kant 2008b, 85).
So an aesthetics of morals, while not indeed part of the metaphysics of morals, is still a subjective presentation of it in which the feelings that accompany the constraining power of the moral law (e.g. disgust, horror etc., which make moral aversion sensible) make its efficacy felt, in order to get the better of merely sensible incitements (Kant 1996, 165).\(^59\)

Aversive feelings of disgust and horror are not in themselves reasons to reject something, but in a bodily way they convey the constraints of the moral law. They can guide us to realization, because they (in some cases) represent the moral law.

His unpublished notes also reveal that Kant clearly struggled to understand the precise role of disgust in the moral judgment process. In Kant’s moral framework, the moral judgment is always prior to the moral feeling, but in one instance even Kant seems to encounter some doubt on this point. After making it clear that abhorrence needs to be shaped through training and practice, he notes in the margin, “Sentiment. Moral Instinct” (Kant 2008c, 152). We can only speculate on the significance of this note, but it does seem plausible that Kant is here seriously considering the arguments of contemporary sentimentalist philosophers like Hume and Rousseau.

Later, Kant is again puzzled by the source of abhorrence: “Is it a spontaneous emotion over the outrageousness and harmfulness? Is it fear for a hidden judge?” (Kant 2008c, 280–281).\(^60\) The problem for Kant is that a disgust response cannot reflect a universal and unconditional moral judgment, if it is merely shaped by custom. Still, Kant does seem to accept

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\(^59\) In German “Daher ist eine Ästhetik der Sitten zwar nicht ein Theil, aber doch eine subjective Darstellung der Metaphysik derselben: wo die Gefühle, welche die nötigende Kraft des moralischen Gesetzes begleiten, jener ihre Wirksamkeit empfindbar machen (z. B. Ekel, Grauen etc., welche den moralischen Widerwillen versinnlichen), um der bloss-sinnlichen Anreizung den Vorrang abzuzugewinnen (Kant 2008e, 406).

\(^60\) The English quote is my translation with help from Alice Christensen. The German quote reads: “... ist es unmittelbar Gefühl der Schandlichkeit, ist es verstekte Reflexion über die Schädlichkeit, ist es Furcht vor einem unsichtbaren Richter?” (Kant 2008c, 280–281).
that abhorrence responses are indeed shaped through education. In a text on “physical education,” he observes that a child can be taught to fear and abhor toads, although a toad “is an innocent animal, like a green frog.” In other words, it is possible for us to be misled about the objects of our abhorrence (Kant 2008d, 466).

This is an important point. The disgust response itself is not reliable because it is shaped by the values and ethics of the culture in which a child is raised. As I discussed earlier, recent research on the acquisition and the nature of disgust supports this premise. In fact, a great example which illustrates that disgust responses are always a product of a particular cultural, political and moral context is Kant and his contemporaries’ misogynist idea of the old woman’s body as inherently disgusting (Menninghaus 2003, 107 and 84–91).

In conjunction with the contemporary research on disgust, we can conclude that even though something may feel wrong and produce a disgust response, this feeling may be unable to withstand moral scrutiny. This suggests that disgust only serves a signaling function for moral judgment. In Aurel Kolnai’s words, disgust is therefore “not a primary experience of evil; insofar as it relates to intellectual and ethical matters at all, it only points toward evil” (Kolnai 2004, 81). Like Kant, Kolnai recognizes that disgust does not imply moral certainty, and writes that in general disgust “can only serve as a signpost towards a subsequent ethical judgment, and cannot be its immediate determining factor” (Kolnai 2004, 82).

Based on these ideas, I argue that disgust responses should be regarded as stop signs at a traffic junction. 61 Disgust—like a stop sign—prompts us to halt and exercise caution. But we need not be paralyzed by the appearance of disgust. Instead, we have to look both ways, so to speak, and decide if and when it is safe to proceed. We should neither simply obey the

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61 To clarify, I am not referring to a traffic light that signals red, yellow, and green but to the red stop signs that are especially frequent in North America (and less frequent in Northern Europe, where yield signs are prevalent).
disgust response nor automatically dismiss it. Instead, we should submit the signal to evaluation and scrutiny.

Under this understanding, the primary value of the disgust response is instrumental and not intrinsic, as the disgust advocates tend to argue. Although disgust serves a signaling function to our moral judgment, we cannot mistake the emotion itself for a ruler of legitimate action. As Kant argues, the relationship is inversed: our understanding of right and wrong shapes disgust. In other words, if there were no stop sign at a traffic junction, we would still halt for heavy traffic and pedestrians passing, because we don’t want to submit others or ourselves to danger and harm. This last point is similar to Nussbaum’s argument that disgust responses are superfluous in any moral condemnation. Even in cases where most people would agree that our disgust is legitimate, such as disgust at incest, cannibalism, or gruesome murder, Nussbaum denies that it is disgust *per se* that makes us view these actions as immoral. Instead she believes that we condemn these acts because they harm other people, as in John Stuart Mill’s harm principle. But whereas Nussbaum dismisses the moral relevance of any disgust response—mainly because she conflates any example of social and moral disgust with projective disgust—I hold that disgust responses potentially can have an important signaling function, because they make us aware of the moral and social principles that we have internalized.

From this perspective, we can agree with moderate disgust advocates like Miller and Adams that many people experience a legitimate moral disgust when they hear about genocidal massacres; we can indeed feel abhorrence at a serious transgression of our moral values.⁶² Some examples of perpetrator disgust may reflect such a moral disgust, but in most cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the intentional object of the perpetrator’s disgust, i.e. if the perpetrator felt horror at the wrongness of the acts or mere non-moral disgust at the bloody scene.

⁶² Several recent philosophical papers also present models that challenge the disgust advocate/disgust skeptic dichotomy (Plakias 2012; Besong 2014; Clark and Fessler 2014).
The crucial question remains: if we are to regard disgust as a stop sign, what role, or priority, should we grant to disgust reactions when evaluating and scrutinizing their legitimacy? The short answer is none. Jeffrie Murphy provides an excellent argument for this conclusion in an article where he questions the United States Supreme Court’s reasoning in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986). The Court ruled that strong disapproval of homosexuality among the majority of citizens in Georgia is sufficient grounds to justify a criminal law banning homosexuality (*Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186). Murphy criticizes this logic and suggests that we apply a three-step test to any such justification, legal or moral, that rests on reference to moral disgust (Murphy 2011, 250).

First, we need to make sure that the emotion of disgust is real and not just falsely reported. Second, we need to establish that there is good reason to believe that the disgust emotion in question is moral in nature—that the attitudes, beliefs, and judgments involved are moral attitudes, beliefs, and judgments. To satisfy this criterion, the object of the disapproval must articulate “at least one of the following: harm, injustice, or certain failures of human flourishing. . . . In short: the status of my judgment as moral judgment is a function, not of its intensity, but of the reasons I am prepared to give in support of that judgment” (Murphy 2011, 252–53). But even when we can establish that certain disgust attitudes, beliefs, and judgments are indeed moral in nature, we still need to evaluate whether these attitudes, beliefs, and judgments are reasonable or rational and not just based on mere prejudice and animus (Murphy 2011, 250). In this third and final step of the evaluation, we are not relying on the sensation of the emotion itself; we are evaluating the ethical principles that created the sensation.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored the complex philosophical issues that surround the different interpretations of perpetrator disgust, and I have
suggested a new way to think about disgust responses. The contemporary debate about disgust and abhorrence remains stuck in the dichotomy of disgust advocates and disgust skeptics, but we can reconcile the gap between these positions by conceptualizing disgust responses as a form of moral perception, distinct and separate from moral judgment. Disgust responses work as stop signs—they summon us to stop and pay caution. But as they merely point toward a transgression of a social or moral principle and, we will want to be sure that our disgust response reflects a moral stance that is sound and well founded. To do this, we must critically evaluate our reaction and the principles that it stems from.

This argument has an important implication for my interpretation of cases of perpetrator disgust. In cases where perpetrator disgust represents a moral disgust, the bodily response itself cannot be said to represent an explicit moral judgment. This bodily and emotional experience merely represents an early stage of moral perception of the situation. The perpetrator’s committed moral judgment is defined by his choices and actions in response to his emotional and bodily response. I will return to a discussion of this point in the final chapter of this study.

Some may object that the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust seems to be more than just a disgust response. They may also see it as a form of vicarious distress, i.e. the discomfort that we feel when witnessing someone in pain. This objection is worth considering, since vicarious distress is an innate capacity that is widely considered as one of the building blocks of empathy and for our capacity to develop morality. Sentimentalists may also object that my distinction between moral perception and moral judgment is flawed because recent evidence from moral psychology shows that moral judgments are primarily a product of gut feelings. In this account, the bodily response in perpetrator disgust already constitutes the agent’s moral judgment. In the next two chapters I consider these two objections in turn.
The Nebulous Promise of Vicarious Distress

Introduction

In this chapter I focus on the ways that the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust can be compared to the feeling of vicarious distress, i.e. the feeling of discomfort we feel when we witness the suffering of another. In most cases of perpetrator disgust, the visceral discomfort that I have discussed seems to contain vicarious elements, because the situations often include a perpetrator’s presence before the suffering of victims. Just as genocide scholars hotly debate the moral or non-moral nature of the perpetrator’s distress, scholars in psychology and philosophy disagree to what extent we should characterize vicarious distress as a moral response. This debate is tightly intertwined with discussions on the role of empathy in morality. On this occasion I focus on two separate, but closely related philosophical questions that are of immanent importance when it comes to understanding the vicarious elements of the distress we see in cases of perpetrator disgust:

First, I consider whether vicarious distress is an instance of emotional sharing. Earlier in section one, we encountered Anwar Congo who argued that he himself could feel the pain of the victims when he re-enacted a torture scene in the role of the victim, but is Congo really experiencing the same emotion as the victims? It seems highly unlikely, and I look for ways to support this intuition by scrutinizing how 1700-century sentimentalists and contemporary philosophers have debated this question.

Second, I ask what kind of motivation we find in instances of vicarious distress. Do feelings of vicarious distress encourage action to help the suffering person or do they primarily motivate us to soothe our own distress? The latter seems to be the dominant trend in the majority of cases of perpetrator disgust. Perpetrators fail to take actions to save the victims of

\[63\] For a scholarly review of the empathy debate, consult Stueber 2014 and Maibom 2014.
mass crimes, instead they lessen their own involvement in direct killings, or grow increasingly sadistic. This gives us reason to doubt the idea that vicarious distress is predominantly prosocial. In my final discussion I give a detailed account of the complex and multifaceted processes of vicarious distress in perpetrator disgust, and I conclude that we need a conception of vicarious distress that does not presume a certain moral attitude or a specific motivation.

What is vicarious distress?

To experience something vicariously is to experience it through the feelings or actions of another, as in the joy parents take in their children. The use of the term dates back to the early 17th century, meaning to take the place of another, i.e. to substitute for someone, usually in reference to punishment, as in the case of Jesus Christ. The word vicarious originates from the Latin “vici” which means a change, exchange, interchange, succession, alternation or substitution. In the early 20th century, the meaning came to refer to something experienced imaginatively through another (Harper 2001; Collins English Dictionary 2015). Vicarious distress is the spontaneous visceral discomfort we experience when we witness another person in pain: our heartbeat may accelerate, we may begin sweating, shaking or feel other symptoms of physical or emotional discomfort. Unconsciously, we may mimic a pained expression.

The contemporary discussion of vicarious distress responses begins with studies of newborns. As any parent knows, newborns mimic facial expression. If a parent sticks her tongue out, an infant will do the same. This reflexive mimicry also has an emotional component. When newborn babies hear the cry of another infant, they also begin to cry. Interestingly enough, newborns don’t cry if they hear a recorded version of their own cry or if they hear other loud and uncomfortable sounds. This early reactive cry of the
infant is a primitive and innate arousal mechanism that disappears in the first half year of the infant’s development. However, although we stop responding with spontaneous crying when we hear others cry after we have grown into toddlers, we continue throughout our lives to feel vicarious distress (Simner 1971; Hoffman 2000, 65).

One evolutionary hypothesis is that the capacity to feel vicarious distress emerged with parental care (Waal 1996, 43; Preston and de Waal 2002). Most animals are also able to feel vicarious distress, and some of the most intriguing examples are the crying and screaming of female monkeys that lose an infant (Waal 1996, 54–55). This brings us back to the idea of perpetrator disgust as a form of “animal pity” that we find among proponents of nativist interpretations of perpetrator disgust. In these interpretations the vicarious distress is interpreted as an innate predisposition to feel prosocial feelings towards others. We find the same idea among psychologists and philosophers working on vicarious distress. As I will explore in this chapter, some argue that our capacity for vicarious distress is a pre-cursor of empathy. Others are more skeptical of this conjecture. In many respects my discussion in this chapter will bear striking similarities to our earlier consideration of perpetrator disgust. Once more, I will assess interpretations that attribute a moral quality to unwitting physical responses, and alternatives that reject this connection. Again we encounter one phenomenon, namely the experience of visceral discomfort to the suffering of others, but many different interpretations (or conceptions) of the social or moral value of the phenomenon.

Because of the involuntarily character of the phenomenon, the agent may not know exactly why he or she felt the distress, or what the distress is directed at. In some cases, it may even be questionable if the distress is vicarious at all, that is if it is a response to another’s suffering. We have, in other words, no easy way of settling the question of intentionality in all instances of vicarious distress—or establishing if there is any intentionality at all. This problem has resulted in different terminologies in the literature
and, as I will explore, these terms already entail different interpretations of the (moral) nature of vicarious distress. Very briefly here are four common ways in which scholars discuss vicarious distress: 64

**Emotional contagion**

One option is to characterize vicarious distress as a specific form of “emotional contagion”. Emotional contagion is widely considered to be one of the most basic vicarious emotional reactions. Emotional contagion can be defined as “the experiencing of an emotion in response to a homologous emotion in someone else” (Maibom 2009, 483). Laughter, for example, is contagious, and we are said to “catch” other people’s emotions merely by being in their presence when they express them. Emotional contagion is typically considered to happen below the threshold of conscious awareness and is closely related to other forms of mirroring and resonance phenomena that we find throughout the animal kingdom. Dogs, for example, are said to become sad when their owner is sad. However, as we will see, there is no consensus on the precise nature of emotional contagion. One of the most pressing questions is whether emotional contagion is an instance of emotional sharing. Another question is whether emotional contagion happens automatically without the involvement of cognition (i.e. whether it is merely other-caused), or whether it is an intentional response to a conspecific’s emotion (i.e. whether it is other-directed).

**Empathic distress**

Another option is to call vicarious distress “empathic distress”. While empathic distress is a global phenomenon, which encompasses many different facets and stages, 65 the minimal definition is that empathic distress

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64 The following outline is based on Stueber 2014, Maibom 2014, Maibom 2012, and Maibom 2009.
65 Hoffman divides the development of empathic distress into five categories: 1) the newborn’s reactive cry, 2) egocentric empathic distress, 3) quasi-egocentric empathic distress, 4) veridical empathic distress, and 5) empathic distress beyond the situation (Hoffman 2000).
is at least other-caused. The reactive cry of the newborn is considered the most basic form of empathic distress, but although this reaction is caused by another, it is primarily egocentric, i.e. a feeling for one self. At later developmental stages empathic distress can also become a feeling that is other-directed, i.e. a feeling that we feel for the other (Hoffman 2000).

Others cut the cake slightly differently and argue that we should distinguish between two types of vicarious distress:

**Personal distress**
Vicarious distress is typically named “personal distress” when the emotional response to someone’s suffering is primarily a feeling for one self. This feeling is therefore merely other-caused and not one of other-concern. It often takes an aversive form, primarily motivating the agent to get rid of his own feeling of distress (i.e. an egoistic motivation). An agent may help the victim in suffering, but only to stop the agent’s own feeling of distress. In other words helping behavior is not the primary motivation. Note that in this conception personal distress is a more general emotional experience that does not need to have a vicarious character (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987).

**Empathic concern**
As a contrast to personal distress, some instances of vicarious distress are conceived as having an “empathic concern”, i.e. a feeling for the suffering other. Empathic concern is typically considered to be the dominant feeling in sympathy and compassion. It is a feeling that has a clear intentional object, namely a feeling of concern (or worry) for the other and the other’s suffering (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987). A dominant tendency is to conceptualize empathy as an emotional stance in which we feel empathic concern for the other. One example is the definition of “empathy proper” as an emotional stance where “we are aware that we feel what we feel because of what another feels” (Maibom 2014, 4–5). Others are more skeptical of such a
rich conception of empathy and prefer to define empathy in minimalistic terms as a basic sensitivity to and understanding of others (Zahavi and Rochat 2015, 543). Some argue that this minimal definition of empathy has moved too far away from our common sense use of the notion of empathy as an prosocial attitude, and suggest that we instead distinguish between “affective empathy” and “cognitive empathy” (Maibom 2014).

To sum up, depending on the interpretation of the specific case we end up with different conceptions of the phenomenon of vicarious distress. As I suggest in Figure 2, many of these conceptions overlap in their characterization of specific cases. A scholar who believes a case of vicarious distress is best described as emotional contagion may be in substantial agreement with a scholar who finds it a case of empathic distress.

Figure 2: Conceptions of vicarious distress
The important point here is that it is possible that some cases of vicarious distress may be a reflection of both personal distress and empathic concern. However, the common practice in current emotion research is to understand emotions in neat singular categories (like the ones we saw above). This may lead to distorted and skewed interpretations of our emotional life, because the phenomenological experience of our emotional responses is diverse and sometimes based on conflicting emotions (Maibom 2014, 7).

The paradox is that most interpretations of cases of vicarious distress rely on the assumption that the intentionality of the emotion (or lack of it) is clear. In other words, most interpretations assume that we can determine what the subject feels distress towards, how the subject experiences this distress (as self- or other-regarding), and the action that the emotion motivates. But often it can be difficult to establish, if, for example, a subject is experiencing other-caused personal distress or an other-directed empathic distress—or some combination of the two. In short, my point is that the main disagreements in interpretations of vicarious distress often arise from different views on the intentionality at work in a specific case.

Another key disagreement regards the ontological status of the feeling: when we experience vicarious distress, do we share the suffering person’s feeling or is our feeling of distress distinct from that of the suffering person?

**Can we share suffering?**

The history of philosophy contains numerous discussions on the importance of vicarious distress in the development of human morality. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to offer a complete intellectual history of these discussions. Here I focus on the important difference, between David Hume, and Adam Smith’s understanding of the nature of vicarious distress. Whereas

66 See also Maibom’s identification of this problem (Maibom 2012).
Hume sees the raw phenomenon of vicarious distress as an instance of emotional sharing, something that immediately produces feelings of other-concern, Smith emphasize that vicarious distress needs to be mediated by an imaginative perspective-taking to lead to concern for the suffering victims. Whereas Smith’s model advocates that my feeling of vicarious distress is distinct from the feeling that I am responding to, Hume seems to argue that I share the victim’s feeling of distress and experience it as my own. As we shall see, we find echoes of both of these positions in the contemporary discussion on the nature of vicarious distress.67

Despite their differences, both Hume and Smith characterize vicarious distress as a natural and innate phenomenon that is inherently prosocial. This idea was common among many eighteenth-century thinkers. As just one example, Zacheus Isham wrote it in 1700: "When we see a miserable Object, Nature it self moves our Bowels to compassion" (Halttunen 1995, 305). The central idea was that any human being, even the worst criminal, would feel spontaneous vicarious distress, and hence empathic concern, when confronted with innocent suffering. Not only philosophers advocated this idea, but also writers and artists:

Sentimental art offered tableau after tableau of pitiful suffering-scenes of poverty, imprisonment, slavery, the aftermath of war, tormented animals, women in distress—all aimed at arousing readers' spectatorial sympathy and thus enhancing (and demonstrating) their virtue (Halttunen 1995, 308).

Both philosophers and artists exposed their audiences to horrific scenarios that provoked vicarious distress. To take one of the most infamous attempts, consider Bernard Mandeville’s vivid description of a toddler that becomes torn apart by a wild hog:

67 In this section I am especially indebted to the analysis of classic sentimentalism by Halttunen 1995 and Force 2003.
To see her widely open her destructive jaws, and the poor lamb
beat down with greedy haste; to look on the defenseless posture
of tender limbs first trampled on, then tore asunder; to see the
filthy snout digging in the yet living entrails suck up the smoking
blood, and now and then to hear the cracking bones, and the
cruel animal with savage pleasure grunt over the horrid banquet;
to hear and see all this, what tortures would give it the soul

Mandeville’s conclusion is that “not only a man of humanity, of good morals
and commiseration, but likewise a highwayman, a house-breaker, or a
murderer could feel anxieties on such an occasion” (Mandeville 1732, vol. 1, p.
256). Despite his or her own circumstances, not only would anyone feel
vicarious distress (here identified as “the most troublesome passion”), this
emotional response would also lead to empathic concern in the form of pity.
Similarly, Smith identifies both compassion and pity as an emotional stance
that everyone, even “the greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the
laws of society” would feel if they either saw or were told about the misery of
others (A. Smith 1976, i.i.1.1.). Importantly for Smith, however, our feeling of
vicarious distress is always distinct from the distress that provokes the
response. This is because Smith insists that we cannot share feelings:

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are
at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers.
They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person,
and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception
of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this
any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own,
if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses
only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy (A. Smith 1976, i.i.1).

Hume has a different conception of vicarious distress. Whereas Smith thought that vicarious distress promotes a feeling of sympathy that arises when we imagine how we would feel in the circumstances of another, Hume adopted Nicolas Malebranche’s idea that we share the feeling of distress with the victim by emotional contagion:

We must therefore know that animal spirits not only flow towards our body parts in order to imitate the actions and movements we see in others; but also they in some way receive their wounds, and share in their misery. Experience tells us that when we attentively observe someone who is being beaten up violently, or is affected with some great wound, animal spirits flow painfully towards the parts of our body that correspond to those that are being hurt in the person before our eyes (Malebranche 1962, vol. 1, p. 236).

In another example that shows the extent to which Malebranche conceives of this process in physiological and medical terms, he argues that the emotional trauma of a pregnant woman could be transmitted to her unborn child, and produce birth defects. The key idea here, and the significant departure from Smith, is that the vicarious distress is merely a form of emotional contagion, which overcomes us automatically, and not a result of imaginative-perspective taking. Just like his mentor Francis Hutcheson who conceptualized sympathy as a “sort of contagion or infection” (Hutcheson 1990, i.ix, p. 14), Hume

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68 The cited quote is Pierre Force’s translation from the original French (Force 2003, 29): “Il faut donc savoir que non seulement les esprits animaux se portent naturellement dans les parties de notre corps pour faire les mêmes actions et les mêmes mouvements que nous voyons faire aux autres; mais encore pour recevoir en quelque manière leurs blessures, et pour prendre part à leurs misères. Car l’expérience nous apprend que lorsque nous considérons avec beaucoup d’attention quelqu’un qu’on frappe rudement, ou qui a quelque grande plaie, les esprits se transportent avec effort dans les parties de notre corps qui répondent à celles qu’on voit blesser dans un autre” (Malebranche 1962, vol. 1, p. 236).
argues that the “passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts” (Hume 2000, 386 (3.3.3)).

It is not completely clear, if Hume meant that the spectator feels the same distress as the victim in pain, or if he believed that the spectator’s distress is merely corresponding to the victim’s distress. Nonetheless, many contemporary philosophers who build on Hume’s legacy argue for the strong thesis, namely that empathic feelings are a form of emotional sharing. We find these arguments in discussions on the nature of empathy. Scholars argue that the core of empathy is “shared affect between self and other” (Pfeifer and Dapretto 2009, 184; Decety and Lamm 2006, 1146) or a “shared or vicarious feeling” (Nickerson, Butler, and Carlin 2009, 43) or a sharing of the other’s mental states (Darwall 1998, 263) where we come to feel a similar emotion after we have perceived the other’s emotional state (Preston 2007, 428).69

In a compelling argument based on insights from phenomenology and developmental psychology, Dan Zahavi and Phillipe Rochat challenge this dominant trend of identifying empathy as emotional sharing. In their view, vicarious emotional sharing is neither necessary nor sufficient for empathy. Their argument is based on a minimalistic definition of empathy “as a basic sensitivity to and understanding of others (rather than as a special prosocial concern for others)” (Zahavi and Rochat 2015, 543). This definition can account for examples where empathy is one-sided without being reciprocal, i.e. where we understand what someone is feeling without feeling the same emotion ourselves.

On the other hand, Zahavi and Rochat argue that vicarious emotional sharing is possible, but only through participation. In other words, when you share a good laugh with a friend you are happy together, and are both actively participating in the same emotion (Zahavi and Rochat 2015, 544). This differs from a situation where you feel happy when you hear your children laughing. The children’s laughter (a shared experience of happiness)

69 I am indebted to Zahavi and Rochat (2015) for this literature review.
makes you happy, but you are not sharing their emotional experience. You are happy because they are happy. They, on the other hand, are happy because of something funny in the ongoing game.

The important point here is that empathic feelings are not necessarily a mirror of the feelings that trigger them, and an important implication of this is that empathic feelings do not necessarily foster a prosocial concern. If we experience pain or other feelings of discomfort, then we typically want to be rid of those feelings. In other words, we are typically motivated to find some way to soothe our pain. If we are merely witnessing someone in pain, we may experience vicarious distress, but this distress is not the same as the sufferer experiences. It therefore fosters a whole range of possible emotions and motivations, spanning from pity to sadism. Even if we wish to be rid of our own discomfort, we may not be motivated to help the sufferer. The capacity to empathically understand another’s suffering is also crucial for a torturer’s capacity to submit his victim to cruel and degrading treatment. As philosopher Max Scheler points out, “cruelty requires an awareness of the pain and suffering of the other, and must be sharply distinguished from a pathological insensitivity to the pain of others” (Scheler, 1954: 14).\footnote{I am indebted to Zahavi and Rochat for pointing me to this quote.}

In a similar fashion the early critics of the sentimentalist movement warned that the main reason people liked to read of horrific scenarios of suffering was primarily because it made them feel better about themselves.

...the poetry of sensibility actually explored not the feelings of the imagined sufferer but the feelings of the spectator watching that sufferer and was geared to demonstrating the spectator/reader's own exquisite sensibility. Wrote Barbauld, ‘we take upon ourselves this burden of adscititious sorrows, in order to feast upon the consciousness of our own virtue’ (Halttunen 1995, 308).
The horrific scenarios of suffering could also make people feel a "dear delicious pain" and "a sort of pleasing Anguish," in other words, "an emotional experience that liberally mingled pleasure with vicarious pain" (Halttunen 1995, 308). By the end of the eighteenth century, a cultural industry that celebrated the “pornography of pain” saw its light:

The spectacle of suffering—which had first emerged from moral philosophy, found its full articulation in sentimental literature and art, then assumed increasingly sadistic forms in popular sensationalism—became the dominant convention of sexual pornography (Halttunen 1995, 317).

Next, I further explore the dark potential in empathic feelings like vicarious distress, demonstrating that such emotions do not necessarily motivate prosocial attitudes or actions.

**Vicarious distress and motivation**

Some contemporary scholars argue that the two models of vicarious distress that we saw in Hume and Smith actually reflect two qualitatively different kinds of vicarious distress, which have inherently different motivations. In short, scholars stipulate that there is a difference between imagining the other’s pain as if we are in their situation (Smith), or imagining that we ourselves are feeling their pain (Hume). According to psychologist Daniel C.

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71 "Delicious pain" is from "Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress," (Wordsworth 1940, 269); "pleasing Anguish" is from the Scottish moralist David Fordyce in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1754), quoted in Crane 1934, 205; "exquisite pleasure" is from the essay "An Inquiry into Those Kinds of Distress Which Excite Agreeable Sensations: With a Tale" (Barbauld 1825, 2:228).

72 In a recent paper, anthropologists Rane Willerslev and Niels Bubandt explore a similar thesis. Based on their ethnographic evidence, they argue that empathic abilities are often used for deceptive and violent purposes (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015, 6).
Batson, the latter condition primarily results in a self-centered personal distress, which primarily motivates the subject to reduce one’s own aversive arousal, whereas Smith’s model of imaginative perspective-taking predominantly leads to empathic concern and potentially prosocial action.

The underlying idea behind Batson’s research is that it is possible to make qualitative distinctions between emotions because emotions have different ultimate goals. Put simply, they lead to different social or moral behaviors. Whereas empathic concern motivates the agent to meet the other’s needs, vicariously induced personal distress directs the agent’s attention inwards, to oneself and one’s own needs (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987, 19–22).73 To illustrate his point, Batson evokes the story of the Good Samaritan from the Old Testament. In passing by the beaten and suffering man, the Levite and the priest must have felt a strong vicarious distress. They may even have avoided stopping because they felt physically disgusted and were afraid they would faint if they gazed too long upon the man’s open wounds. The Samaritan faced the same aversive vicarious distress, but he overcame it because he was moved by “the tender emotion” (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987, 25–26).74

To demonstrate that mere vicarious distress and empathic concern really are two distinct emotions, Batson and his colleagues conducted a number of experiments. They exposed test subjects to a range of cases with victims in varying situations of need. In a bogus radio announcement, test subjects heard the story of a woman who had suffered a tragic car accident and was left with horrible scars and a shattered career. In another, more extreme case, test subjects watched a woman being exposed to increasingly painful electric shocks (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987, 29). They then filled out a questionnaire to report their feelings during the experiment, choosing from a list of eight adjectives that Batson and his colleagues had selected to reflect the vicarious emotion of personal distress (“alarmed,

73 Here I rely on the argument in Batson’s pioneering work; for a more recent version of the same, see Batson 2009.
74 Batson quotes this story from his predecessor William McDougall.
grieved, upset, worried, disturbed, perturbed, distressed, and troubled”) and six adjectives that the researchers had selected to reflect empathy (“sympathetic, moved, compassionate, tender, warm, and soft-hearted”) (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987, 26). In another set of experiments, researchers tested the subjects’ responses to appeals for help. Test subjects who had reported emotions classified as traits of personal distress were less likely to respond to calls for help than those who had reported emotions associated with empathy.

Unfortunately, the theoretical framework of Batson and his colleagues rests on shaky foundations. In the first set of experiments, a crucial irregularity occurs. Subjects report feeling “sympathetic” and “tender” at the same time as they report so-called distress emotions, while others report to have felt “grieved” and “worried” even as they express emotions ascribed to empathy. The researchers are therefore forced to allow that in “some need situations—for example, when an innocent child or pet is suffering—it seems likely that distress and empathy will be closely intertwined” (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987, 29). But if we take this concession seriously, there is little reason to think that empathic concern and personal distress can be isolated as entirely distinct emotions. Batson’s study illustrates how difficult, if not impossible, it is to delineate one emotional response from another.

Instead of demonstrating that vicarious distress has no prosocial potential, Batson’s research shows that vicarious distress can be simultaneously self-centered and other-concerned.75

Batson and his colleagues are right, however, in concluding that high level of egocentric vicarious distress makes people less likely to help in situations of need, and this finding is supported by many other studies. Some 20 years after the original studies, Jean Decety and Claus Lamm carried out a series of neuro-scientific experiments that seemingly confirmed Batson’s thesis that vicarious distress may be self-centered, containing little or no empathic concern. Decety and Lamm monitored the brain activity of test

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75 Se also Maibom’s discussion of this point (Maibom 2014, 7ff).
subjects as they watched a series of video clips featuring patients undergoing painful medical treatment. The researchers asked one group of participants to imagine themselves as the patients while another group was asked to focus on the feelings and reactions of the patients. As they had hypothesized, the researchers found that the group that projected themselves into the aversive situation felt high personal distress and low empathic concern, while the group asked to focus on the patients felt high empathic concern and low personal distress (Decety and Lamm 2006, 1152).

We can, however, also understand the dynamics of Decety and Lamm’s experiment through Martin Hoffman’s model of vicarious distress. In contrast with Batson, who argues that the seeds of antisocial behavior are present in vicarious distress, Hoffmann argues that vicarious distress has an inherently prosocial potential. While Batson conceives of antisocial behavior as a direct outgrowth of vicarious distress, Hoffmann conceives of it as a distortion of the original prosocial potential.

In Hoffman’s model vicarious distress is (in its innate form) the newborn’s reactive cry. Later, as we develop cognitively, our responses become more complex. Instead of only becoming distressed, we feel more nuanced emotions and turn our attention to the subjects in distress with concern for their suffering and a desire to alleviate it. For the newborn, the vicarious distress is merely other-caused: it does not express an other-concern. But as soon as we start to understand and engage with the world in a more complex manner, the vicarious distress response can also be accompanied with more complex feelings like sadness, pity or indignation. In other words, vicarious distress at its core remains an emotional resonance mechanism, but the nature of our response depends on the level of our cognitive development. Hoffman, in other words, sees our capacity to feel vicarious distress as a pre-cursor for the capacity to feel empathic concern.

While Hoffman assumes that vicarious distress indeed contains an inherently prosocial potential, he also stresses that this potential risks

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76 Hoffman uses the term “empathic distress”.
being transformed into pure egocentric distress ("empathic overarousal") if the victim’s distress is too intense and salient (Hoffman 2000, 197). Hoffmann defines empathic overarousal as an involuntary process in which the observer’s vicarious distress becomes so painful, intolerable and aversive that it risks moving the observer out of the empathic mode entirely (Hoffman 2000, 198). In such a case, we don’t necessarily feel motivated to help the person who suffers but may be more inclined to minimize our own vicarious discomfort by, for example, removing ourselves from the situation. In Hoffman’s view, empathic overarousal is a distortion of the prosocial potential in vicarious distress. From this angle, we can say that the test subjects in Decety and Lamm’s experiment became so emotionally entangled in their own vicarious experience that they forgot about the subject’s experience of pain.

**The vicarious distress of perpetrators**

We can now begin to consider how this body of research contributes to our understanding of perpetrator disgust and its many different interpretations. First, many nativist and habituation interpretations seem to understand perpetrator disgust as textbook examples of empathic overarousal. They conceptualize the perpetrator’s distress as holding an inherently prosocial potential that can, however, easily be distorted or overcome. Even if the perpetrator’s vicarious distress contains an other-concern, the intensity of the perpetrator’s experience can transform the prosocial potential of disgust into its exact opposite: an all-consuming self-pity and an aversive attitude towards the victims. This argumentation bears resemblances to Hoffman’s warning that “when a person is exposed to another’s distress repeatedly over time the result may be that the empathic distress diminishes to the point of indifference to the victim’s suffering” (Hoffman 2000, 203).
Second, many perpetrator organizations are also very much aware that the ability to regulate one’s own emotions is an important way to avoid the negative pitfalls of empathic overarousal. In Hoffmann’s studies the goal of teaching nurses and health care workers coping strategies was to help them overcome their “compassion fatigue” (Hoffman 2000, 204). But perpetrator organizations, too, often engage in what we may call empathy management. Of course, the objective in this case is not prosocial, but designed to help the soldier continue killing. As I previously discussed, soldiers are emotionally distracted with alcohol, food and entertainment after important killing actions, and cognitively influenced through ideological training. Recall, for example, Himmler’s infamous address to SS-officers in Poznan 1943, in which he explicitly addressed the vicarious distress of SS-officers during killing operations. Himmler reassured the audience that although they were now hardened, they remained decent (Himmler 1943).

In a perverted way, perpetrator organizations are therefore very much attuned to Decety and Lamm’s recommendation that “affective sharing must be modulated and monitored by the sense of whose feelings belong to whom” in order to avoid empathic overarousal (Decety and Lamm 2006, 1154). However, the goal is emotional apathy towards the victim and not, as Decety and Lamm wish it, empathic concern. Perpetrators typically habituate to the killings quickly and learn how to manage their distress.

Indeed—and this brings me to the third point—in most of the cases we studied, the perpetrator primarily focuses on his own distress, which often leads to self-pity. This gives us more good cause to reject vicarious distress as a form of emotional sharing. Recall that Anwar Congo argued that he could feel the victim’s pain when he played the role of the victim in a reenactment of a torture scene. The example is curious, because it could be seen as a variation of Smith’s imaginative perspective taking with Congo placing himself in the “same” situation. Obviously, the situation is radically different. Congo, most importantly, faces no imminent danger of death and can call off the scene whenever he wishes, but there is another important
sense in which we can deny that Congo is sharing the suffering of the victim. As Zahavi and Rochat insist, emotional sharing, i.e. a true common experience necessitates reciprocity. Two torture victims may be able to share each other’s suffering, but a mere re-enactment can never amount to a genuine experience of emotional sharing.

The forth and final insight from developmental psychology literature is that studies of empathic overarousal confirm that differences among individuals are an important variable to consider. For example, studies of nurses show that the most empathic subjects quickly become “emotionally exhausted” and that their empathic distress turns into personal distress (Hoffman 2000, 203). This is interesting in consideration of the fact that only a minority of soldiers seem to experiences perpetrator disgust. Adolf Eichmann might have been right when he insisted that he was the sort of person, squeamish and prone to fainting, who could not have become a doctor. In modern terms he might have self-identified as a “highly sensitive person”—a term coined by psychologist Elaine Aron to describe the 20% of people who are said to process sensory data more deeply than others due to biological differences in their nervous systems (Aron 1997). Perpetrators who initially felt disgust—who fainted and vomited when they were watching or participating in atrocities—may have been highly sensitive people. This may seem a provocative claim, but only if one assumes that there is, in fact, a fundamentally prosocial potential in vicarious distress, something that our discussion so far has cast very much in doubt.

To recap, we have seen that the innate capacity to feel vicarious distress is also vital for a torturer when he submits his victim to humiliation and suffering. The most sophisticated torture techniques—for example forcing a victim to watch while a family member is being raped—rely on the torturer’s capacity to imagine the distress of the victim. In the same vein, Johannes

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77 Torture is “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person” according to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (United Nations General Assembly 1984).
Lang argues that much of the violence in Nazi concentration and death camps also “presupposes an awareness of the victim’s subjectivity”, and that the victim is therefore not dehumanized in a literal sense in which the perpetrator views the victim as vermin (Lang 2010, 241). In other words, when torturers and perpetrators turn to sadistic violence against their victims, they are also relying on the capacity to feel vicarious distress. These considerations cast doubt on conclusions that vicarious distress is primarily prosocial.

For the above reasons we should be skeptical of theses such as those of James Blair, who argues that vicarious distress is fundamentally violence-inhibiting. His research concludes that psychopaths are prone to develop antisocial and violent behavior because they lack the capacity to feel vicarious distress (Blair 1995). He identifies aversion and withdrawal as the primary features of vicarious distress; a sad facial expression or the sight and sound of tears can inhibit aggression. The stronger the stimuli, the greater the withdrawal: a screaming, sobbing individual prompts more withdrawal than a mere sad face (Blair 1995, 2–3).

Blair, like others we have considered, underestimates the antisocial potential of aversion and withdrawal associated with vicarious distress. In cases of perpetrator disgust, the event of withdrawal cannot be said to be prosocial in any meaningful sense. It does not reduce aggression, harm, or violence towards the victim. Instead, it most often results in emotional detachment from the crimes or, at best, a self-pathtetic impulse to extricate oneself from the situation—to be removed to another form of duty that does not involve direct shooting, for example. In the case of Police Battalion 101, commanders reorganized the killing actions after realizing that “the work” was too emotionally draining for the soldiers. They brought in Ukrainian auxiliaries to carry out the killings.

To sum up, we are again able to mirror some of the key intuitions in the three interpretations of perpetrator disgust to the key positions in the research on vicarious distress. If we primarily conceive of vicarious distress as self-centered personal distress (as scholars like Batson do), then the non-
moral interpretation is right that the perpetrators did not feel for the victims, but merely for themselves. In this framework, the perpetrator’s distress may be an instance of emotional contagion (understood as an other-caused emotion), but it does not amount to emotional sharing (i.e. that the perpetrator feels the same feeling as the victim), and it certainly does not include the empathic concern (or even potential for empathic concern) that nativist and habituations interpretation suggest.

A more compelling model is to conceive of vicarious distress as a dynamic phenomenon, which can encompass different and even conflicting emotional stances at the same time. Through this lens, non-moral interpretations are too simplistic and one-dimensional while both nativist and habituation interpretations are right to point out that a perpetrator’s feeling of vicarious distress (which may contain some degree of empathic concern) may easily transform into self-pity and even sadism. Recall the German Luftwaffe pilot who explains that it only took him a few days to get used to killing. First, he thought it was terrible, but already on the fourth day he enjoyed it (Neitzel and Welzer 2012, 48).

We have seen that our capacity to feel vicarious distress is innate—even newborn babies react with distress to the cries of other babies. To a certain extent, nativist interpretations are therefore right to argue that the perpetrator disgust qualifies as a form of animal pity, because we do in fact share this basic capacity with other animals. But we should be careful not to overemphasize the prosocial potential of this capacity. Vicarious distress and even empathy should not be conflated with empathic concern that motivates prosocial action merely because of the vicarious nature of these capacities. As I have argued in this chapter, vicarious distress may equally cause us to turn away, to shun, and indeed to abuse. Eichmann may or may not have been more prone to feel vicarious distress but, in any case, his distress did not indicate disapproval of the “final solution”.

The essential problem seems to be that both moral and non-moral interpretations are unable to divorce the moral characteristics of perpetrator
disgust from the supposed moral motivation that may accompany such a response. Both are unable to divorce the question: “Is this bodily response an instance of moral conflict?” from the question: “Can this bodily response motivate to prosocial action?” Put differently, both such interpretations assume that an instance of vicarious distress has an inherently prosocial nature in the sense that it could (potentially) motivate the perpetrator to prosocial action. I have already traced the thread of the nativist and habituation interpretations along this line of thought. But proponents of non-moral interpretations are fierce in resisting the attachment of any moral aspect to the phenomena precisely because they, too, seem to assume that the implication of a moral aspect implies a prosocial motivation, and would thus serve to mitigate the criminality of the perpetrators.

As I have discussed in this chapter, the reality of the motivational potential in vicarious distress is much more complicated and multifaceted than this. Indeed, even if the perpetrator feels discomfort and empathic concern because of the suffering of the victim, we have now seen that he may still feel absolutely no motivation to help alleviate that suffering. What is needed is a conception that recognizes vicarious distress as possessing both prosocial and antisocial potential.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that we should be careful not to overestimate the moral motivational force of vicarious distress. Although vicarious distress may be one of the essential building blocks for developing the capacity to feel empathic concern, we need to recognize that vicarious distress might also lead to antisocial behavior. I reviewed evidence from moral psychology that suggested that a focus on one’s own feelings of distress is more likely to promote an egoistic motivation whereas a focus on the victim’s distress feelings is more likely to make us feel empathic concern. This suggests that
Smith’s model of imaginative perspective taking (i.e. to imagine the other’s distress) is more morally productive than Hume’s model that has a focus on the agent’s own experience of distress. Nonetheless, in either case, I found that that vicarious distress is rarely (if ever) a matter of emotional sharing, and also that even Smith’s model of imaginative perspective taking may not motivate prosocial action.

It remains an open question whether the antisocial behavior that grows out of vicarious distress is the result of a transformation process (in which the prosocial potential becomes distorted through empathic overarousal, as Hoffman argues), or if the seeds for antisocial behavior are present already in the nature of vicarious distress (as Batson argues). The conclusion we can draw is that vicarious distress has the potential to lead to both prosocial and antisocial actions. Even in cases of vicarious distress that do reflect an empathic concern, there is no guarantee that this feeling will foster a motivation for moral action. The experience of vicarious distress is complex, dynamic and multifaceted and may consist in multiple and contrasting feelings of both empathic concern and personal distress.

This last point is important. A convincing conception of both vicarious distress and perpetrator disgust must account for the vast amount of conflicting feelings and motivations that both phenomena contain. In the next chapter I propose one such conception and argue that, like the feeling of disgust, vicarious distress fosters a moral perception of the world, but that these feelings do not predetermine a certain moral attitude or moral motivation.
The Limits of Moral Perception

Introduction

In this final chapter I provide a more detailed answer to the question that initiated this dissertation: does perpetrator disgust indicate that the perpetrator in some sense understands the moral wrong of the acts that he is engaged in? In some cases, yes. Involuntary bodily responses like distress and disgust can be a sign of moral conflict, and in this chapter I want to narrow my focus on the cases that may fit this category.

In Werner Herzog’s movie, Into the Abyss (2011), we encounter the story of an employee who used to work in a so-called “Death House” in Texas, where public executions take place. After a period in which the numbers of executions rose significantly because of a newly elected governor, the employee experienced a strong emotional and physical reaction. One evening after the execution of a woman, he spontaneously started shaking, sweating and crying after seeing her photo on a news show. Confused, he thought, “Why am I shaking?” He then saw the faces of all the people he had seen executed and the look in their eyes as they were sitting in the cell, and awaited for the moment of the execution to arrive. He called out to his wife, and told her he needed to talk to someone, and she called the local reverend. In the course of the conversation with the reverend, the employee came to understand his emotional turmoil as a response to the nature of his work. He quit his job and is today against capital punishment.

In another account, a Japanese soldier recalls feeling a shiver up his spine when he saw a small baby in the arms of its dead mother during his first participation in a military action as a young soldier in the Imperial Japanese army in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945):
And then, although I tried to go, I couldn't walk. And really, the older soldiers came in from behind, came in; we were being chased—"Run away!" they said. And then I left it just like that. We ran away, and then, so, after that, I thought about it, that child, with nobody around, would just die like that, I thought, and that was the most—of the war—my actions, for the first time—that sort of, to me, disgusting sort of feeling—that really hit me, you know? (Dawes 2013, 5).

Like many other perpetrators the Japanese soldier learns to overcome his disgust response. The killing of civilians fast becomes routine. However, after the war, he undergoes a drastic change of thought during his imprisonment in China and today he publicly denounces the war crimes he participated in.78

Interestingly, neither the Japanese soldier nor the employee from the execution chamber initially recognize their involuntary bodily responses as a moral conflict. It is not until later that they interpret their reactions as responses to violations of moral principles. As I've stated throughout the dissertation, it remains an open question as to why they reacted physically, but both end up interpreting their physical reactions as a realization of the moral wrong being done.

Many other cases of perpetrator disgust do not prompt the perpetrator to interpret his disgust as moral conflict. Recall the case of Anwar Congo, who suddenly retches while visiting an old crime site. His physical discomfort does not lead him to evaluate his actions in moral terms. He sees himself as having saved Indonesia from communism and would do it all again, given the chance (Syarina 2012). As in the two other cases, we have no

78 After the war, Sakakura-san was among some 1,100 Japanese soldiers first imprisoned by the Soviet Union under brutal conditions in Siberia. Later they were extradited to the Fushun Prison in China, where their treatment significantly improved. They received medical care and could participate in sport and cultural activities. More importantly, they underwent thought reform, something they themselves called "The Miracle at Fushun". Repudiating the values of their past, they dedicated the rest of their lives to promoting pacifism. Upon return to Japan, the men formed an organization to bring light upon the war crimes of Imperial Japan. Although they have been scorned and ignored by the public, they have continued their work as long as age and health have permitted it (Dawes 2013, 5–6).
way of settling whether Congo’s disgust is a reflection of moral conflict or not, but we can ask a more general question: Is it possible that bodily responses like those in perpetrator disgust can be a reflection of a moral conflict even when the perpetrator denies feeling guilt and remorse? How might bodily responses reveal moral convictions that we are not consciously aware of?

I previously argued that involuntary bodily responses can function as a form of moral perception. In this chapter I want to expand on this idea. In cases where the perpetrator himself explicitly and consciously acknowledges his guilt the argument is uncontroversial because the perpetrator assigns moral value to his aversive reaction. However, I want to push the point a bit further. Involuntary bodily responses can also function as *unconscious* moral perception, that is, the perpetrator can feel the acts are wrong without conscious judgment. How is such a thing possible? How can involuntary bodily responses reveal unconscious moral convictions?

We first need to answer a broader question, namely what causes an emotional response, and to what degree, if any, we are in control of our own emotional responses? Here I enter into the discussion of whether emotions are a product of cognitive processes or not. I endorse a moderately cognitivist model of emotions in which emotional responses are seen as caused by cognitive processes (I refer to this as the cognitive cause model), but adopt many insights of non-cognitive models of emotions.

The cognitive cause model also has normative significance. It suggests that involuntary bodily responses may be relevant to moral perception, but that we should not rely on them in moral deliberation. It is therefore in alignment with the disgust as stop sign argument that I presented earlier. This argument, however, faces a couple of significant objections: first, neosentimentalists argue that emotions shape moral judgments and not the other way around; second, some scholars argue that we can sometimes skip deliberation and rely on our emotions as reliable guides to moral action.

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79 I borrow this terminology from Jesse Prinz (Prinz 2004, 13).
I meet these objections by arguing that bodily responses like disgust and vicarious distress primarily foster a moral perception with an agnostic moral judgment, and that this moral perception should not be conflated with the actual, committed moral judgment of the agent. Because the bodily responses under discussion are shaped by habituation, they may distort and mislead moral judgment. To make sure they in fact represent our committed moral judgment, we must submit them to scrutiny. In the final discussion, I explore whether this normative recommendation is fit to explain the dynamics in cases of perpetrator disgust.

The scope of the argument I present is focused on involuntary aversive bodily responses such as disgust and distress, and not on emotional responses as such. However, I broaden my focus beyond cases of perpetrator disgust and also discuss other forms of involuntary bodily discomfort that are signs of unconscious moral perception, for example the discomfort we feel in implicit bias.

**Emotion and cognition**

When we ask how involuntary bodily responses in perpetrator disgust can reveal unconscious moral convictions, we are also asking a more general philosophical question about the nature of emotional responses, namely whether perpetrator disgust is a passive phenomenon that the agent receives unwillingly, or an emotional response that the agent has some control of? In other words, if perpetrator disgust reveals unconscious moral convictions, to what extent do they represent the perpetrator’s actual moral convictions, i.e. the convictions that he is committed to and willing to defend?

What prompts these involuntary emotional responses? So far I have implicitly endorsed a cognitive conception of emotion. In the chapter on disgust, I argued that involuntary bodily responses can be a way that we feel the constraints of moral principles, which we have internalized. The bodily
responses therefore have an ultimate cognitive cause—I refer to this idea as the cognitive cause model. According to this model, we cannot trust our aversive, bodily responses to reveal true moral judgments. Moral judgment can be prompted by these bodily responses, but a sound moral deliberation should not be relying on the bodily responses. Is this cognitivist conception of emotion a sufficient and satisfying explanation of perpetrator disgust?

Cognitivist conceptions of emotions are appealing because they propose that emotional responses are about something, i.e. that they have intentionality. The cognitivist position developed as a counter-response to the traditional philosophical misconception of emotions as irrational and beyond our control. Cognitivists believe that emotions are an integral part of our consciousness, and that cognitive processes control our emotional responses. In the strong version of this view, emotions are not just a way of perceiving the world, they are a way we evaluate the world. In short, emotions are judgments. The central idea is that my cognitive assessment (i.e. my beliefs, attitudes, evaluations) of the world defines how I feel emotionally. If I feel angry, I am able to give reasons for my anger.

Most theories about disgust are cognitivist in nature. They assume that my perception of something as disgusting is relying on a learned, cognitive scheme that defines what I perceive as disgusting. If I, for example, believe that I am smelling an exquisite French cheese I will find the smell pleasant, but if some one tells me that the same smell came from a rotten plate of food, I will feel disgust and maybe nausea. But, as we previously discussed, disgust responses do not always align with our conscious evaluations, and they are therefore hard to reconcile with the strong cognitivist thesis of emotional responses as judgments with a clear and transparent intentionality.

This is especially true for cases of perpetrator disgust. Here the feeling of disgust overwhelms the soldiers; they have no control over the bodily changes they experience (nausea, vomiting, shaking and sometimes fainting). Moreover, because of the swiftness and involuntary character of the
response, the soldiers are often not consciously aware of the source of their disgust.

One option—if we stay loyal to a strong cognitivist approach—would be to say that perpetrator disgust is not a full-grown emotion of disgust in the sense that it has a specific intentionality or semantic content. Instead we may see it as a bodily response to being in distress and conflict, in which the agent does not yet know what to do or think. A long time ago, Lucius Seneca argued that we should call such emotional states “pre-emotions” because they do not yet include a conscious evaluation. Seneca identifies pre-emotions as involuntary body states that have no conscious cognitive content, but are nonetheless shaped by our consciousness (Konstan 2013). They are, in other words, preliminary or rudimentary signs of an emotion: spontaneous, reflex-like reactions that may announce the arrival of a full-fledged emotion, like the shivering we feel in connection with fear, our hair rising to the word of bad news, or a blush at indecent words. Pre-emotions can be vicarious or empathic responses, as when we can’t help smiling because everyone else is smiling, or when we feel sadness because we are surrounded by people who mourn.

Interestingly, Seneca also points to cases of pre-emotional responses that seem to bear close resemblance to cases of perpetrator disgust. The “dreadful sight of tortures” may affect us emotionally even though we believe that the victims deserve the cruel treatment (Seneca 1999, bk. 2). Seneca also argues that pre-emotions may be instinctual, but that they can also be shaped by habituation, and gives the example of a soldier who jumps at the sound of a trumpet in peacetime. In Seneca’s model pre-emotions are in a certain sense products of our cognition, but they do not contain a conscious cognitive component. By contrast, a full-fledged emotion is "brought into existence and brought to an end by a deliberate mental act" as classics scholar David Konstan puts it (Konstan 2013, my emphasis).

The idea of a pre-emotion captures one of the essential features of the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust, namely that it is a bodily response,
which is involuntary and not necessarily caused by a conscious cognitive judgment. But the strong cognitivist terminology of pre-emotions divorces the bodily response from the emotion itself. The idea of a pre-emotion thereby fails to recognize the essential role of bodily changes in emotions and the fact that we cannot always control these bodily changes.

Especially in recent years cognitivist theories of emotions have been under attack on these grounds. Two central philosophers in this context are Jenefer Robinson and Jesse Prinz who have independently launched a very similar critique of cognitivism (Prinz 2004; Robinson 2005). One of their central complaints is that cognitivist accounts overlook the central aspect of what an emotion is, namely the feeling itself. They launch a new version of the so-called “feelings theory” of emotions—originally formulated by William James and Carl Lange. Contra Seneca’s strong cognitivism, they argue that the central characteristic of an emotion is the feeling itself, and the bodily changes that we cannot control. In their view, cognitivists are wrong to assume that “explicit, disembodied judgments are ... the gold standard” in how we perceive emotions (Prinz 2004, 76).

Robinson and Prinz’s sophisticated non-cognitivism is interesting for our purposes because they are interested in the automatic, involuntary bodily responses like the ones we see in situations of perpetrator disgust. As this affective response is the core feature of an emotion in their view, they therefore advocate that emotions are primarily gut reactions that enter our awareness before we have had a chance to understand their cause. Both refer to emotions as an alarm system that uses the body to help us understand ourselves and how we are faring in the world (Prinz 2004, 65–69). This also implies that emotions can foster moral perception, because they help us orient ourselves in the world and reveal what is important to us:

[Emotions] are like bodily radars detectors that alert us to concerns. When we listen to our emotions, we are not being swayed by meaningless feelings. Nor are we hearing the cold
dictates of complex judgments. We are using our bodies to perceive our position in the world (Prinz 2004, 240).  

The central idea for both scholars is that emotions do not necessarily contain cognition or have an explicit propositional content because emotions are faster than cognition. We do not in other words control our emotions; they operate on an automatic and unconscious level. They both point to a vast range of evidence from experimental psychology that suggest that emotions involve primitive evaluations that occur below consciousness and independently of higher cognitive processes (Robinson 2005, 38–42; Prinz 2004, 34). The core idea is that we are able to evaluate our surroundings through our emotions and without the help of cognitive processes.

To really understand this non-cognitivist model, we need to understand their conception of cognitive processes. To Robinson cognition consists of higher processes that are deliberate and aware. More specifically, she restricts the scope of cognitive processes to those that take place in the neo-cortex, i.e. the part of the mammal brain that is involved with functions such as sensory perception, generation of motor commands, spatial reasoning, conscious thought and, in humans, language (Robinson 2005, 45). She therefore concludes that the fast, emotional evaluations that happen on the subcortical level are non-cognitive, “in the sense that they occur without any conscious deliberation or awareness, and they do not involve any complex information processing” (Robinson 2005, 45). Her point is that emotions appraise a situation in a rapid, automatic way without semantic content and that this non-cognitive appraisal always results in a physiological change (Robinson 2005, 46).

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80 Indeed, in Prinz’s model the idea of emotion as perception is not a metaphor; Prinz argues that emotions are literally part of the perceptual system (Prinz 2004, chap. 10).
81 They both point to social psychologist Robert Zajonc and his thesis that affect precedes cognition (see for example Zajonc 1984) and to neurophysiologist Joseph LeDoux, who argues that the core of an emotion is a mechanism that evaluates stimuli in an emotional way and that this feature is not particular to humans, but something we find even in species like insects and fish (LeDoux 1996).
Following a different route, Prinz arrives at a similar conclusion. He defines cognitive processes as those we can control and those we have activated. More specifically, he distinguishes between cognition (a thought) and cognitive processes (thinking). His idea is that thinking (i.e. the cognitive process) requires an effort. Cognitive states are “those that exploit representations that are under the control of an organism rather than under the control of the environment” (Prinz 2004, 50). Applied to the debate on emotions, Prinz argues that we may exercise cognitive control over our emotions (we can, for example, imagine them), but we cannot (always) willfully select our emotions. Emotions may contain cognition (thoughts and concepts), but we can also experience emotions without cognition. Infants and animals, for example, experience emotions even though they lack concepts (cognition). Prinz’s main idea is that emotions do not need to contain cognition and he argues that the most of the time emotions do not involve cognitive processes. We instead experience them passively, as something we cannot control (Prinz 2004, 50).

To sum up, the non-cognitivist position hinges on a definition of cognitive processes as slow and deliberate thought processes that we actively control through our will power. Should we accept this definition? Not necessarily. We can agree with large parts of Prinz and Robinson’s arguments without committing to non-cognitivism. If we resist the dichotomy between thinking (as controlled) and feeling (as automatic), we can understand thinking (cognitive processes) as a process that involves both controlled and automatic processes.82 This solution has been advocated from a range of so-called moderate cognitivists and is compatible with the cognitive cause model that I endorse.83 In particular, psychologist Richard Lazarus’ influential dimensional appraisal theory, which both Prinz and Robinson draw on heavily (but eventually abandon because of their disagreement with Lazarus’

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82 ‘This is also the premise in the recent wave of research on the dual process of cognition in psychology. For an overview see Evans and Stanovich 2013.
83 For a brief introduction to these scholars and their work, see Prinz 2004, 14–17.
definition of cognitive processes), provides a helpful lens with which to consider these issues.

In Lazarus’ view, emotions are caused by cognitive appraisals. Appraisals are evaluations of what one’s relationship to the environment implies for one’s wellbeing. More simply, an appraisal is an inner judgment about what matters to an organism. This broad definition of appraisals includes the possibility that animals also have emotions. A dog, for example, will feel sad if his owner is sad, because the owner and his well-being is important to the dog. In other words, Lazarus thinks of cognition in a very minimalistic form—as meaning or meaningfulness that is always involved in emotion, because most animals are also capable of learning to evaluate their environment according to elementary distinctions of harm, threat and benefit.\(^{84}\) However, although Lazarus understands appraisals as cognitive states, this does not imply that they are necessarily conscious or controlled. His classic experiments from the 1950s showed that his subjects were able to discriminate between threat and no threat on a preconscious or unconscious level, or put differently that they were able to appraise something without being aware of it (Lazarus called this “subception”). He therefore argues that two kinds of appraisals can cause an emotional bodily response: (i) conscious, deliberate and will-based appraisals and (ii) automatic, unconscious and uncontrollable appraisals (Robinson 2005, 44; Lazarus 1991, 153–156,190).

Lazarus’ version of the cognitive cause model also offers a more sophisticated notion of pre-emotions. To Lazarus, pre-emotions are composed of a number of innate states like curiosity, attentiveness, and the orienting and distaste reflexes that are not emotions themselves; they merely set the scene for an emotion by preparing the person or animal to evaluate what is happening. In contrast to Seneca, Lazarus therefore argues that pre-emotions can count full-grown emotions, but only when these reflexes become coupled

\(^{84}\) More specifically, every appraisal and its corresponding emotional response is oriented around what Lazarus calls “a core relational theme”. Fright, for example, is about “facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming physical danger”; anxiety is about “facing uncertain, existential threat” (Lazarus 1991, 122).
with a cognitive appraisal (Lazarus 1991, 54–57). This idea is in alignment with the research on disgust that we previously reviewed: the distaste reflex itself does not qualify as a disgust response. A full-grown disgust response is shaped by learning and cognitive evaluations.

This moderate cognitivist model of emotion is compatible with the Kantian conception of disgust that I previously endorsed. In this view, bodily responses merely convey a meaning that originates in cognitive evaluation, but there is not cognition or semantic content in the bodily responses themselves. The relationship between bodily responses and cognitive evaluations is analogous to the relationship of sunburns and the sun. The sunburns are caused by the sun, but this does not mean that the sun is part of their constitution. Similarly, the bodily responses are constituted by cognitive evaluations, but cognition is not part of their constitution (Prinz 2004, 17; Gordon 1987). This hybrid solution is distinct from traditional cognitivist theories because the bodily response does not need to be a product of conscious and deliberate evaluation, and so can explain why some cases of perpetrator disgust are prompted by unconscious evaluations.

This model can also give a more satisfying explanation of where bodily responses get their intentionality from or put differently how uncontrollable and automatic bodily responses can be about something. Bodily responses borrow their intentionality from the cognitive evaluations that caused them. This is an important step in the argument, because this is what separates a mere pain in the chest which is caused by a heart condition from a sudden pang in the chest that we feel in moments of grief. The pain we feel when grieving is caused by a cognitive understanding of the fact that we have lost someone we love. The bodily pain therefore borrows the intentionality of our cognitive assessments of our situation (Goldie 2009, 53–56). This model agrees with non-cognitivists that the bodily response is what makes us aware that we are feeling an emotion. In a phenomenological sense it is the pang in the chest (the bodily response) that makes us feel our grief, but the bodily response is caused by a cognitive evaluation (either conscious
or unconscious). In this view, bodily responses like those in perpetrator disgust are therefore merely a medium that conveys existing (sometimes unconscious) cognitive evaluations. Their intentionality or about-ness is borrowed and determined by cognition. Such bodily responses are like the ground swells of an explosion, or the beating of waves from a passing boat.

Bodily responses like physical discomfort and dizziness, the gag-reflex and the distaste response are all mechanisms that operate involuntarily when triggered. In our upbringing we learn what to feel and how to respond emotionally to specific situations and actions, and these values (or their violations) may be associated with certain feelings or physical responses. Our bodily responses can therefore reveal to us what we have been taught to value and “that what we value might not be epistemically accessible to us if we did not have such responses” (Goldie 2009, 48).

Bodily responses and moral judgment

So far I have argued that involuntary bodily responses sometimes convey internalized values, and that they can play an important role in moral perception, i.e. in facilitating the way we understand the world in moral terms. An important question still remains unanswered: What role do these bodily responses have for moral judgment?

Involuntary bodily responses can reveal values that we are not consciously aware of, but they do not necessarily reflect our moral standpoints and principled commitment. Cases of implicit bias are good examples of how this is possible. Patricia Devine’s classic studies show that white North Americans who are explicitly dedicated to non-racist beliefs still experience visceral discomfort in interactions with African-Americans.
Many Southerners have confessed to me, for instance, that even though in their minds they no longer feel prejudice toward Blacks, they still feel squeamish when they shake hands with a Black. These feelings are left over from what they learned in their families as children. (Pettigrew, 1987, p. 20 quoted in Devine et al. 1991, 817).

Much research has been done on implicit bias since Devine’s pioneering work, but the key insight remains that “adoption of nonprejudiced beliefs or personal standards does not immediately eliminate prejudice-like responses” (Devine et al. 1991, 817; Devine 1989). We may continue to experience automatic bodily responses long after we have changed our views. In cases of implicit bias these involuntary responses do not reflect a conscious moral judgment. The responses are certainly prejudiced, in the sense that they reveal the subject to have internalized prejudices against a particular group, but the responses themselves are not racist claims. Similarly, my argument is that the bodily responses in some cases of perpetrator disgust may convey certain embodied values but they cannot necessarily be said to constitute a conscious and explicit moral judgment that the perpetrator is committed to.

One objection that may be raised, as psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues, is that moral judgments are most commonly the direct result of gut feelings and swift, unconscious intuitions. Haidt’s experiments show that people (by what he calls “moral dumbfounding”) tend to defend the quick moral judgments that they feel via their gut and intuitions, and that they will continue to defend them even when they acknowledge that they cannot explain their reasons. While Haidt’s empirical conclusions are striking and compelling, his theoretical framework is problematic because it implicitly employs and blurs two distinct concepts of moral judgment.

85 For an overview of recent research on implicit bias, see Brownstein 2015 and Jost et al. 2009.
86 There is a longer story to be told on whether this should be considered a racist attitude or not. See John Dovidio’s comprehensive work on aversive racism. For a summary of this research field, see Dovidio, Glick, and Rudman 2005.
Haidt understands moral judgment as operating in two domains. First and foremost, he argues that moral judgments are part of an automatic, unconscious intuitive system that is shaped by the particular culture we have grown up in. Moral judgments are therefore “evaluations (good vs. bad) of the actions or character of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues held to be obligatory by a culture or subculture” (Haidt 2001, 817). On the other hand, he also argues that moral judgment can arise out of moral reasoning—a process he defines as a “conscious mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people in order to reach a moral judgment” (Haidt 2001, 817).

Haidt’s thesis is that in most cases these two moral judgments are one and the same, and as a consequence he does not give them separate labels. But we are, in fact, dealing with two very different kinds of moral judgments. One is quick, unconscious, and agnostic in the sense that it merely conveys embodied values from a specific culture. The other is deliberate, explicit and committed because it is based on moral reasoning.

To Haidt, this difference is not of importance because his claim is that in most cases the agnostic moral judgment is the same as the committed moral judgment. In his experiments, people continued to defend their intuitions (agnostic moral judgment) even when they realized that there were good reasons for rejecting them. When people, for example, heard a story about two siblings who had consensual sex, they immediately said it was wrong, and then they started searching for reasons. Sometimes they would just say that they knew it is wrong, but that they could not explain why. He therefore concludes that moral reasoning is predominately part of an ex post facto process where we try to justify our feelings. Moral reasoning is more like a lawyer trying to build a case rather than a judge searching for the truth (Haidt 2001, 814), or like:
“the press secretary for a secretive administration—constantly generating the most persuasive arguments it can muster for policies whose true origins and goals are unknown ... (Haidt 2007, 1000).

While Haidt’s model may be true with regard to a specific domain of moral judgments, it faces an important complication when the two moral judgments are in conflict with one another. Sometimes the outcome of our moral deliberation, i.e. the committed moral judgment, is not in alignment with the agnostic moral judgment (which is based on gut feelings and quick intuitions). Which one represents the agent’s moral attitude in such a case? As Jeanette Kennett and Cordelia Fine put it:

Is it the one based on the ubiquitous automatic attitude that ‘leaks’ into the agent’s socially significant behaviors, or that can become expressed verbally when the agent is unable to discount, cognitively elaborate, invalidate or disguise it? Or is it the attitude expressed in judgments at times when the agent is motivated and cognitively able to engage in self-regulatory control of automatic attitudes? (Kennett and Fine 2008, 80).87

Haidt is not entirely clear on this, but his answer tends to be that the fast and quick moral judgment is the real moral judgment, and the one that best represents our moral attitude:

[T]he roots of human intelligence, rationality, and ethical sophistication should not be sought in our ability to search for and evaluate evidence in an open and unbiased way ... we should instead look for the roots of human intelligence, rationality, and

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87 For an in-depth discussion of this problem consult Kennett and Fine’s excellent paper “Will the real moral judgment please stand up?” (Kennett and Fine 2008).
A number of sentimentalist theories on morality agree with Haidt on this point. Most interesting for our purposes is Prinz’s idea that moral judgment is constructed by emotions (Prinz 2007). Again, Prinz argues against both cognitivism and rationalism by insisting that cognitive processes do not need to play any role in the construction of moral judgments. And consistent with his non-cognitivist model of emotions, he argues that emotions primarily convey value from some other instance, namely the sentiments. Through sentiments, we learn and internalize moral rules. Sentiments are not emotions, but dispositions to feel emotions (Prinz 2007, 84–85). Prinz’s idea is that we learn (from our surroundings, parents and peers) what is morally right and wrong through primarily negative emotions like anger, disgust, shame and guilt (Prinz 2007, 68–79). When a child is scolded for taking an extra cookie or for hitting his younger sister, he learns to feel shame and in his long-term memory this experience eventually develops into a sentiment, i.e. a disposition to feel shame in these particular situations. In the future the child will therefore feel ashamed not only when he is greedy or when he hits other kids, but also at the mere thought of behaving this way, and in this way his sentiments can prevent him from acting in such a way. The sentiment (the disposition to feel a certain emotion) is in Prinz’s terminology the same as a moral rule or value (Prinz 2007, 96–97). Any particular instance of the sentiment, for example the feeling of shame, is therefore the moral judgment itself; the feeling conveys the moral value.

88 Note that Prinz does not include vicarious distress in the category of moral emotions, because he conceives of it as primarily self-directed. Vicarious distress does not “prevent us from conducting and condoning acts of incredible brutality” (Prinz 2008, 24). On the contrary, vicarious distress and other empathic feelings are not necessarily great motivators for moral actions. In some cases they are even more likely to motivate aversive behavior, like social withdrawal (Prinz 2011, 220).
To sum up, the neosentimentalists assume that in general the most reliable way to trace an agent’s real moral judgment is to look to his emotions. They assume that an agent’s agnostic moral judgment predominantly is in alignment with his or her committed moral judgment. But in many cases this explanation is unsatisfying. Consider again a case of implicit bias. If I find myself feeling disgust at the thought of homosexual sex, but immediately dismiss this feeling as wrong because it is in conflict with my ideals, it seems wrong to say that my gut feeling represents my real moral judgment, i.e. the judgment that I am committed to and endorse.

Both Haidt and Prinz are aware of this objection. Already in Haidt’s original article, where he introduces his Social Intuitionist Model of Moral Judgment, as well as in later adjustments, he ends up embracing a classic rationalistic model which advocates that we can only overcome our automatic prejudice and bias through explicit moral reasoning and deliberation (Haidt 2001, 829). He consents that the “tight connection between flashes of intuition and conscious moral judgments... is not inevitable”, and that it is possible for us to block “the normal tendency to progress from intuition to consciously endorsed judgment” (Haidt and Bjorklund 2007, 818). This is an important concession, because it undermines Haidt’s strong thesis, which claims that moral reasoning merely functions as a press secretary or lawyer for emotions and gut feelings, and thereby clarifies that we cannot always rely on the causal pathway between gut feelings and moral judgment.

Prinz, however, makes no similar concession. But his reply to the objection is convoluted and unsatisfying. He argues that moral emotions like disgust are regulated by meta-sentiments (he also uses the term meta-emotions), which are feelings that we have in response to other feelings. In this understanding, for example, we feel guilty for not feeling guilty or, as in the case discussed above, feel guilt for feeling disgust towards homosexuals. Meta-sentiments therefore change our moral emotions and moral values over time, and bring them in alignment with what we really believe (Prinz 2007,
But it is unclear why it is necessary to distinguish between a meta-sentiment and a sentiment, when both are defined as dispositions to feel actual emotions. A more serious problem is that it remains unclear what regulates the meta-sentiments or the sentiments in general? How is it possible for us to break the spell of previously internalized sentiments and bring our emotional responses in alignment with what we really believe? How is moral progress possible? In fact, in relation to this more general objection, Prinz later concedes that we can only change moral beliefs and behavior through critical self-examination (Prinz 2007, chap. 8).

To sum up, even committed neosentimentalists like Prinz and Haidt admit that gut feelings are not always reliable guides to moral judgment. Through different routes, they also endorse the rationalist belief that critical self-examination is sometimes the only way to ensure that our agnostic moral judgments are in alignment with our committed moral judgment. But rather than reject the sentimentalist model entirely, we must incorporate its important insights. Indeed, the cognitive cause model that I endorse and neosentimentalist accounts share important similarities. Both models embrace the idea that we sometimes feel that something is morally wrong before we can put it into words or provide a reason for it. In other words, the two models agree that moral perception is sometimes conveyed in an embodied and unconscious way. They even agree on the fact that involuntarily bodily responses have no cognitive value in themselves, but that they merely convey a value from some other instance. However, they are in fundamental disagreement about what this other instance is: Prinz’s model points to the sentiments, the cognitive cause model to internalized moral principles, and Haidt’s model seems to be somewhere in-between, endorsing both possibilities.

It is significant that neosentimentalists agree with the cognitive cause model that critical self-examination is the best way to ensure that our gut reactions represent our moral convictions. Despite this, their general point is that most of the time our gut reactions get it right (in the sense that
they do reflect what we really believe) and we don’t need reason to evaluate and confirm the validity of their judgment.

From a different perspective, a group of contemporary philosophers argues in a similar way. Although they explicitly argue that we should distinguish between moral perception and committed moral judgment, they agree with the sentimentalists that in some cases we can skip reflection and rest assured that our agnostic moral judgment represents our committed moral judgment.

To Robert Roberts moral perception relies on affects because they make us feel concern or care for someone or something. In this understanding, affect is an integral part of the emotion itself; it is how the emotion feels to the subject, and it is therefore more than a mere bodily sensation. Affects give value to an emotion as a “perceptual access to the goodness and badness of situations” (Roberts 2013, 49). Nonetheless, this emotional perception of the situation’s value is not the same as an actual moral judgment. Affects precede the judgment, “just as in many cases sensory perceptions precede empirical judgments” (Roberts 2013, 53). Similarly, Arne Johan Vetlesen argues that concern-based empathic emotions play a key role in moral perception. They grant us the first take on a situation and direct our attention, but they only dictate our actions if we let them (Vetlesen 1994, 175). Lawrence Blum argues in a similar fashion that affective and concern-based empathic understanding is one of the crucial features of moral perception, which he also understands as the agent’s initial impression that takes place before deliberation (Blum 1991, 702–707).

The common strand and broader point of these arguments is that an affective understanding of a moral situation is necessary for a complete understanding of the situation. Our bodily responses and feelings do not just prompt moral perception and set the scene for moral evaluation. They also give the agent an epistemically higher quality judgment than the emotionless person (Roberts 2013, 14). Similarly, Vetlesen emphasizes that although

89 See Nussbaum 2003 for a more strongly cognitivist variation of this argument.
moral perception is a sort of activity, in the sense of Kantian ap-perception, where the subject constitutes the moral value and don’t just receive data passively, a failure to perceive an object in the correct moral light is ultimately due to a “failure at the primordial level of receptivity” (Vetlesen 1994, 163). In other words, our ability to understand something in the correct moral terms relies on our ability to understand in the correct emotional terms.

Whereas all three scholars agree that moral perception and moral judgment are distinct from one another and that an explicit and committed moral judgment rests primarily on reflection and critical deliberation, they also argue that moral perception can lead directly to moral action without passing through a process of deliberation, as if by shortcut. Blum calls this “direct compassion”—an agent apprehends the right thing to do immediately, and without a need to consult any principles (Blum 1991, 712).90

Not anyone can take this shortcut and skip moral deliberation. Roberts warns that only the virtuous have “veridical emotional perceptions” (Roberts 2013, 87). The emotional responses of the vicious are distorted and underdeveloped, “less in touch with morality” (Roberts 2013, 53). Similarly, Vetlesen adds that an impaired capacity of perception restricts the agent’s access to the domain of moral phenomena. If the agent cannot feel the constraints of the moral law, the agent is no longer restricted by moral principles, and there is so to speak no “moral brake” (Vetlesen 1994, 213). Vetlesen points to the brutality of the Nazi regime as an example of such perceptual impairment.

But how do we know whether we can trust our emotions and skip critical reflection to leap straight into action? How can we know if we are merited to take such a shortcut? Who can evaluate and confirm that we are virtuous and in possession of the right moral outlook and how can we issue or accept such a guarantee? These problems are especially pressing when it comes to bodily responses like disgust and vicarious distress. We have no control over our disgust responses and, at times, we are not able to

90 Søren Engelsen launches a similar argument; see Engelsen 2013, chap. VII.
distinguish if a response of nausea is a sign of illness, core disgust or socio-moral disgust. As I argued in the disgust chapter, only an evaluation of the disgust response and its significance (i.e. what social or moral principle, if any, it stemmed from) can help us gain clarity on these questions.

In the previous chapter I argued that we face a similar problem with empathic responses like vicarious distress. Empathy is a basic innate capacity that allows us to relate to other people, but empathic understanding does not just promote prosocial motivations and actions. It is the same capacity that makes us able to torture or engage in sadistic crimes. Moreover, as many cases of perpetrator disgust show, the feeling of vicarious distress easily transforms from other-concern into self-pity and even sadism. Vetlesen has recently adapted his position to meet this objection and argues that sadistic violence may sometimes emerge out of empathic concern. The perpetrator may explode in a sadistic and violent frenzy when he is not able to live out his motivation to help the suffering victim (Vetlesen 2011).

In short, my point is that there is no short-cut between the moral perception of these involuntary feelings and a sound moral judgment. The involuntary bodily responses primarily have instrumental value for our moral perception, i.e. they work as alarm systems that caution us to stop and pay attention. In other words, bodily responses can direct our attention towards something, i.e. be the first step in a process of moral perception, and so, help us discover and evaluate our values. But again, the bodily responses do not constitute these values; they merely represent them. We should therefore, as Peter Goldie puts it, “respect our emotional responses, and listen to what they have to say to us and about us. But they are not the final arbiter: our emotional responses should be held up for examination and reflection” (Goldie 2009, 48).

This last point is crucial. When I refer to these bodily responses as a stop sign or an alarm system, I am not only stating a descriptive point, but a normative one. Because bodily responses are faster than our reflected consciousness, emotions can direct our attention to something that we have
forgotten or not yet considered. But as the cases of implicit bias suggest, we may not always be happy to discover the values that lie behind our bodily response. A reflection over the causes of our bodily discomfort may push us to change our behavior and attitudes in the future. In fact, research on how to eliminate implicit bias shows that we can get rid of many of our automatic thoughts and discomfort, when we are made to reflect on them (Devine et al. 2002).

The moral perception of perpetrators

Throughout this chapter I have argued that we should never rely on just our gut feelings, because these gut feelings primarily convey social and moral values that we have internalized and which now operate in embodied and automatic ways. In a certain sense gut feelings like disgust and vicarious distress are not private and individual, but public, because they often represent the social and moral principles in the society (or the subculture) we belong to (Ahmed 2014). They therefore do not always represent the same values that we would ascribe to if we were asked to state our opinions explicitly. This is why it is important to distinguish between moral perception and moral judgment, because moral perception merely conveys an agnostic moral judgment, whereas I understand a real moral judgment to be one that the agent is committed to and willing to defend if asked to do so.

How does this general argument translate into concrete cases of perpetrator disgust that convey unconscious moral convictions—the cases to which I dedicated this chapter? The disgust and the distress work as an alarm system or a stop sign that impels the perpetrator to halt and reflect upon the situation at hand. In an ideal world this would lead the perpetrator to the conclusion that his acts are in conflict with his principles of moral right and wrong. This is, however, rarely the case. Instead the perpetrators understand their bodily responses as irrelevant signs of weakness that must be overcome.
In these cases, one may ask if it wouldn’t have been better if the perpetrators didn’t reflect on the significance of their bodily responses? Should they have simply followed their gut feeling?

This is a serious objection to the stop-sign argument that I have advocated so far. In my Kantian inspired rationalist model, critical reflection is like a Deus Ex Machina in a Greek drama: it enters late in the act to resolve the remaining complications. Reason plays the role of the hero on the white horse who rides in to save us from fallacy. From feminist to critical theory, this idealized conception of reason has been heavily criticized. To take just one example, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the Kantian ideal of reason as completely detached from emotions easily distorts into an instrumental reason that ends up misrepresenting the original goals of the Enlightenment. In their view, it was precisely this cold and calculating reasoning (detached from emotions) that enabled the Nazis to plan and carry out the Holocaust—and it is the same instrumental reason that continues to submerge humanity into new forms of barbarism (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988, 1).

As we already discussed, many philosophers and genocide scholars draw the same conclusion from cases of perpetrator disgust, namely that reflection may distort the prosocial potential in an emotional response. This is the key intuition for both nativist and habituation interpretations of perpetrator disgust. Glover and Arendt, for example, both argue that the perpetrators lived out a distorted Kantianism when they stopped listening to their emotional responses and abided only their (ideologically shaped) reason.

However, Arendt also notices the potential distortion that may lie in the involuntary bodily responses themselves. In her terminology, the animal pity can fast transform into self-pity. This insight is significant. Both emotion and reason can mislead us. It is problematic to assume that it would have been better if the perpetrators simply followed their disgust response. Disgust is an aversive emotion—it primarily motivates the subject to get away from whatever produces the uncomfortable feeling and does not necessarily
lead to pro-social action. On the contrary, one striking conclusion from the cases I studied is that perpetrator disgust is easily overcome. Even if we were to grant that perpetrator disgust has a prosocial motive, a central point in this dissertation has been that such aversive emotional responses are easily distorted and can even lead to increased violence against victims.

A related problem is the idea that a disgust response can motivate direct moral action without any cognitive mediation. The implicit, problematic assumption here is that there is a straightforward connection between an emotion and the actions that it motivates. Few contemporary theories endorse this view of emotions as action dispositions or action tendencies. Even non-cognitivists like Prinz and Robinson argue that emotions do not directly cause actions. Emotions may provide an agent with a set of motives, but the decision to act on these motives is not a direct cause of the emotion but of cognitive processes.

To understand how this works we must distinguish between motives and motivations. All emotions contain motives, in the sense that they give us reasons to act. But emotions do not necessarily impel us to act or contain a motivation. The difference here is subtle but significant. The motivation to act is a result of choice that follows the emotion and is not strictly speaking a part of the emotion itself (Prinz 2004, 193–196).

Emotional responses are always and immediately monitored by cognitive processes. The defining feature of an emotion is the bodily response, which is prompted by an appraisal (either conscious or unconscious), but immediately after (or maybe even simultaneously with) a process of cognitive monitoring steps in and evaluates the feeling. This cognitive monitoring does not necessarily assume an explicit and deliberate nature in the form of a slow and effortful reflection. Often we correct our gut reactions without the need for prolonged reflection. It is this cognitive process that controls and defines the behavioral response to an emotion (Robinson 2005, chap. 3).

In other words, we cannot predict how an agent will respond based on the emotions he experience. The involuntary bodily responses like
those we see in perpetrator disgust do not directly cause a particular form of action. As I have argued throughout the dissertation there is a whole range of different possibilities for how an agent chooses to respond to his emotion. His actions may not even be a product of a conscious and deliberate decision, but even so it is still not a direct cause of the emotion, but the result of an unconscious cognitive monitoring. Another higher-order question, which goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, is what the exact relationship is between actions and motivations.91

The above discussion points to some fundamental problems in the study of perpetrator disgust and for the study of emotions in general. In our interpretation of our bodily responses, an overreliance on either reason or feeling is equally problematic, and inescapably so. There are three main reasons for this:

First, our interpretation of our emotional responses is always an after-the-fact assessment that is prone to error. The process of naming our emotions can give us a sense of control because we think we understand our emotional responses, but in fact we have no way of accessing the actual sequence of affects that occurred in us and what exactly triggered our emotional response (Robinson 2005, 79–81, 91).

Second, the interpretation of our emotional responses is always shaped by the context that we are imbedded in. This point is illustrated by the three cases that introduced this chapter. Both the Japanese soldier and the

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91 Modern philosophical literature distinguishes between different reasons we give for actions. There are reasons that explain what we do, reasons that justify what we do, and finally reasons that motivate us to do something. There is far from consensus on whether a justifying reason (also called a normative reason) is always the same as a motivating reason (Lenman 2011). A soldier, for example, may be genuinely motivated to stop killing and help the victims in a situation of genocide, but his de facto motivation was outweighed by other considerations. He might have been genuinely dedicated to Nazi ideals, or afraid of reprisals and court-martial. In this situation the soldier’s justification is merely a pro tanto reason, and not the same as his ultimate motivating reason. For a comprehensive examination of the empirical question of what motivates soldiers to continue killings in acts of genocides and mass atrocity, see Jonathan Leader Maynard’s studies of the concept of ideology in perpetrator studies and his compelling argument that perpetrator motivations are much more diverse than scholars have recently assumed (Leader Maynard 2014).
employee at the Death House only came to understand their bodily responses as *moral* responses when they interpreted them in a context that endorsed such an interpretation. Congo, on the other hand, has not reached such a conclusion. It is an open question whether this is because his revulsions were non-moral or because he lives in political climate where his acts are still considered heroic.

Third and most importantly, the process of naming an emotional response—even when it is the wrong name—can alter the nature of the emotional response itself. If I say I am indignant that my husband has left me for another woman, but my emotional expressions and responses reveal that I am experiencing shame, then the mere fact that I continue to say I am indignant may change my emotional response into a feeling of indignation (Robinson 2005, 91). In other words, we may experience emotions passively but by naming them (even when we do so incorrectly) we are able to exercise control over them.

The dynamics of this process are similar to the theory of cognitive dissonance that I endorsed as the superior model for explaining perpetrator disgust in section one—and the key reason why I continue to favor a moderate version of the cognitivist cause model of emotions. The point is that the perpetrators are able to reduce (and often entirely remove) their feelings of disgust and distress by changing the way they interpret their circumstances. We find a good example of how this process works in Himmler’s Poznan address, which I have referenced on several occasions. Here Himmler explicitly acknowledges that the SS-officers must have felt emotionally conflicted when they were asked to kill women and children. Himmler’s strategy is not just to ask the soldiers to “suck it up”. Instead he urges them to reframe the way they think about their emotional responses. If they can conceive of their acts as morally acceptable, then their emotional responses are just a mere weakness that they have to learn to overcome. If they are able to interpret their emotional response in this way, they will be able to undertake this sort of work and still conceive of themselves as decent.
Is there any way these soldiers could have escaped the way the political context that framed their understanding of their emotional responses? My stop-sign model encourages the agent to take his emotional responses seriously, but also to critically evaluate the legitimacy of the messages that the responses may convey. But there is no guarantee that this process of self-examination will promote moral action. These points constitute a fundamental, inextricable problem. Our feelings can mislead us, and so can our reason. Nonetheless, to make sure that our emotional responses are in alignment with our committed social and moral principles, our best hope is reflective self-examination. No better alternative is available to us.
Conclusion

I began this dissertation by asking a specific question: does perpetrator disgust reflect a moral response to atrocity? My aspiration was that a study of perpetrator disgust and its many interpretations would not only give us a more complete understanding of the phenomenon itself, but also of the complex relationship between bodily responses, emotions and human morality.

In section one I reviewed fundamentally opposite scholarly interpretations of the moral (or non-moral) nature of perpetrator disgust. I argued that the primary reason for these different interpretations is that perpetrator disgust is not a uniform phenomenon that can be identified with one single paradigmatic case. Instead it is a phenomenon that consists of many different kinds of cases. Although we rarely (if ever) can categorize an individual case conclusively, we can conceptualize the different cases on a spectrum that stretches from cases of non-moral disgust to those where the disgust is accompanied with explicit guilt feelings and committed moral judgments about the wrongness of the acts. In between these two extremes, we can conceive of the cases where emotional responses merely reflect unconscious and agnostic moral judgments, and where feelings of other-concern transform into feelings of self-pity and even sadistic, “monstrous pity”.

Furthermore, I argued that another key reason for the variety of interpretations is a different understanding of the intentional object of the disgust response—and whether there is an intentional object at all. In other words, this is a disagreement about why the perpetrator feels sick: Was it because what he did was morally abhorrent or because he was merely disgusted by the gore of the scenery? These disagreements are not just about whether uncontrollable, bodily responses of distress, discomfort and disgust count as moral or not, but also about what constitutes a moral quality: if the
perpetrator's disgust and discomfort is not accompanied by conscious feelings of guilt does it make sense to label his response *moral*?

These questions became the turning point toward the second section of the dissertation. Here I addressed the more general question of what connection, if any, involuntary bodily responses of disgust and vicarious distress have to morality. To what degree do such bodily responses convey a sound moral perception and what motivational force do they have? My aim was not just to deliver a descriptive account of this relationship, but also to identify the proper role of bodily responses in moral judgment.

In the chapter on disgust, I argued that feelings of disgust responses have a primarily signaling function. Disgust responses work as stop sign— they impel us stop and pay caution, but they merely point towards a transgression of a principle; they make us perceive that a transgression takes place. In this way disgust responses convey a certain moral message and serve an important role for in moral perception. However, they are not the final arbiter to moral judgment. Disgust responses notoriously distort and transform moral judgments, and this is a good reason to skeptical of them. We have an obligation to consider whether our disgust responses convey moral values that we are willing to stand behind and affirm.

In the following chapter on vicarious distress, I focused on the complex transformation process that feelings of perpetrator disgust may undergo. While the capacity to feel vicarious distress is innate and central to the development of morality, I caution against overestimating the moral motivational force of vicarious distress. The capacity to feel vicarious distress can also be central to cruel and degrading behavior. The feeling of vicarious distress can distort an empathic concern toward a self-interested motivation to escape the situation or a sadistic motivation to harm the victim.

A central point that cut across these two chapters is that feelings of perpetrator disgust entail a complex dynamic of contrasting moral attitudes of both empathic concern and self-centered feelings. This makes it difficult to categorize a specific case of perpetrator disgust and to establish the exact
intentionality that is at play in it. Because these feelings happen suddenly and without the agent’s willful consent, it is often an open question what they are directed at.

Another important conclusion is that bodily responses like the ones we see at work in perpetrator disgust (i.e. fainting, vomiting, distress and discomfort, etc.) are shaped by an agent’s social, moral and political upbringing. Although these bodily responses may be based in instincts and innate reflexes, they are throughout our socialization and life modulated to serve many different functions. Put differently, they are borrowed out to serve other purposes than their evolutionary origins.

In the final chapter, my primary goal was to give a more detailed account of the interplay between these bodily responses and moral judgment. Here, I narrowed my focus to cases of involuntary bodily responses that point to some moral convictions including cases of both perpetrator disgust and implicit bias. I argued that any convincing understanding of the dynamics between involuntary bodily responses and moral judgment is to be found somewhere between rationalism and sentimentalism, and a cognitive and a feeling theory of emotions. I endorsed a moderate cognitivist model of emotions as cognitive causes. In this view, involuntary bodily responses primarily convey moral values and attitudes that we have internalized and the moral perception that such bodily responses convey should therefore not necessarily be thought of as the agent’s committed moral judgment, but as an agnostic moral judgment. The normative implication of this argument is that we are obliged to reflect on the moral perception that arises from these bodily responses as it may be in conflict with our committed moral judgment.

My methodology proceeded from case studies of perpetrator disgust to offer a new lens to examine existing assumptions about emotions and moral judgment in philosophy and psychology. This approach offered both advantages and disadvantages.
By considering a vast range of related cases from a multitude of fields, I was able to uncover a number of implicit assumptions in the various scholarly interpretations of perpetrator disgust, vicarious distress, disgust, and the moral character of emotions. I identified how separate scholarly fields were occupied with the same fundamental discussions about the moral (or non-moral) value of involuntary bodily responses.

With the perspective from the empirical research on disgust and vicarious distress, for example, I was able to point out the intuitions that lie behind nativist, habituation and non-moral interpretations of perpetrator disgust. This allowed me to reconcile seemingly contradictory assumptions into a fuller and more comprehensive explanation of perpetrator disgust as a phenomenon that encompasses a range of conflicting moral and social attitudes: egoistic and empathic concern as well as core, social and moral forms of disgust. This perspective also led me to reject the most adamant voices among nativist and non-moral interpretations.

Another important insight is that descriptive dimensions of the debates on these involuntary bodily responses are often entangled with the normative dimensions. The powerful and inescapable nature of the disgust response, for example, leap the disgust advocate to conclude that it contains an important moral message that we should not ignore. I addressed this problem by distinguishing concept from conception or in other words the phenomenon from its interpretations. The inherent problem is that any attempt—also my own—to understand these phenomena always entail some interpretation. We have no objective perspective from which we are able to evaluate perpetrator disgust and its many interpretations.

My bottom-up method also entailed its challenges. The typical approach in philosophy of emotion is to organize emotions in neatly, separate categories based on their intentionality. This is a plausible project as long as we primarily aim to theorize about emotions and acknowledge that we are building idealized models. But the murky and complex reality of emotional responses makes it more difficult (if not impossible) to establish what
intentionality a concrete emotional response has and what motives it
contains. If we accept the fact that we experience emotional responses
passively, i.e. that the process of what triggers the emotional response
operates on an unconscious level, then we must also concede that even the
agent who experiences the emotion is not infallible in determining the
intentionality of a given emotion. Moreover, we rarely (if ever) experience a
clear and distinct emotion at a time, so the traditional approach in philosophy
of emotion risks creating a somewhat skewed version of our emotional life.

What are the alternatives? One option is to study the emotions in
context, paying attention to the political, social and moral context that
emotions are part of. This approach is pursued by a wide range of scholars in
affect theory. Political theorist Sara Ahmed, for example, focuses on what
emotions do and how they shape politics and social interaction (Ahmed
2014). Recently historians have also started to look at the history of
emotions. Moreover many philosophers choose to study emotions as they
are depicted in literature, fiction, music and other arts.

Inspired by these approaches, I recap my central conclusions
through a reading of Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange* followed by a few
brief considerations of the implications for the way that we conceive of
emotional responses like disgust and distress in politics, education and the
rehabilitation of war veterans.

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92 Recent examples of this trend include *The History of Emotions* (Plamper 2015), *The Book of Human Emotions* (Watt-Smith 2014), and the activities at the *Centre for the History of the Emotions*, Queen Mary University of London, The Max Planck Institute’s *Research Center for History of Emotions* and The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for *History of Emotions*.

93 Example include *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music and Art* (Robinson 2005), *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Nussbaum 2001) and many more.
Nausea as a morally healthy response

One of my central conclusions is that feelings of disgust and discomfort sometimes convey an agnostic moral judgment, but it is not the feeling itself that is moral or which defines something as moral. The feeling merely points to some transgression. It is the agent’s internalized moral principles that dictate what he feels disgust for, and not the other way around. Our feelings may make us aware that something is wrong before we are able to put this into words, but the feeling itself is not the cause of whatever judgments, decisions or motivations that may follow it.

We find an excellent demonstration of this conclusion in Anthony Burgess’s modern fable, A Clockwork Orange (1962), adapted by Stanley Kubrick into the iconic movie. In the story’s dystopian world, we meet Alex, a young rebel who loves to commit random acts of violence—“good old ultra-violence” as he calls it in “Nadsat”, the slang-language he uses to narrate the story. While in prison for murdering a lady during a burglary, Alex is offered early release if he will try the new experimental “Ludovico technique” that conditions Alex to feel nauseous and physically uncomfortable whenever he witnesses or contemplates an act of violence. The technique does not eliminate his desire to perform violence but the physical discomfort prevents him from following the urge.

The Ludovico technique is a process of learning by association. While Alex is watching film clips with extreme and brutal violence, he is injected with a serum that makes him feel physically ill. Strapped to a chair, his eyes are forced open, with no way to escape the sights and sounds of the films. Initially, Alex is excited that his punishment consists of viewings of his favorite movies, but soon he begins to feel the effects of the technique:
I began to feel sick. I had like pains all over and felt I could sick up and at the same time not sick up, and I began to feel like in distress, O my brothers, being fixed rigid too on this chair (Burgess 1985, 105–106).

Next, he watches a man being tortured and a shopkeeper burned to death after her store is robbed. Alex calls the doctors: "I want to be sick. Please let me be sick. Please bring something for me to be sick into." The doctor reassures him: "Imagination only. You've nothing to worry about" (Burgess 1985, 107).

By the end of the screening, he has a terrible headache, stomachache and dryness in his mouth. He has a feeling that he “could like sick up every bit of pishcha... [he] had ever eaten” (Burgess 1985, 108). When the doctor informs him that he needs to sit in for two similar screenings the following day, Alex is terrified. His response satisfies the doctor who goes on to explain the doctrine of morality behind the Ludovico technique:

'Ooh, no,' [Alex] said. 'It was horrible.'
'Of course it was horrible,' smiled Dr. Branom. 'Violence is a very horrible thing. That's what you're learning now. Your body is learning it.'
'But,' I said, 'I don't understand. I don't understand about feeling sick like I did. I never used to feel sick before. I used to feel like very opposite. I mean, doing it or watching it I used to feel real horrorshow. I just don't understand why or how or what—'
'Life is a very wonderful thing,' said Dr Branom in a like very holy goloss. 'The process of life, the make-up of the human organism, who can fully understand these miracles? Dr. Brodsky [the director of the Ludovico experiment] is, of course, a

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94 “Food” in Nadsat.
95 “Good” in Nadsat.
96 “Voice” in Nadsat.
remarkable man. What is happening to you is what should happen to any normal healthy human organism contemplating the actions of the forces of evil, the workings of the principle of destruction. You are being made sane, you are being made healthy. [...] You felt ill this afternoon [...] because you're getting better. When we're healthy we respond to the presence of the hateful with fear and nausea. You're becoming healthy, that's all. You'll be healthier still this time tomorrow’ (Burgess 1985, 110–111).

A few days later, when Alex has had enough and learned his lesson, Dr. Brodsky explains to him the full of ambition of the Ludovico technique. He will only be “cured” when his “body reacts promptly and violently to violence, as to a snake, without further help from us, without medication” (Burgess 1985, 118).

Alex feels the force of the Ludovico technique when he tries to escape his prison cell. As soon as he raises his fists to fight the guard and joyfully imagines him already beaten on the floor, the sickness rises in him as “a wave” and “a horrible fear”. Alex feels as if he will die: “I like tottered over to the bed going urgh urgh urgh” (Burgess 1985, 122). The guard ends up smacking Alex instead, and Alex falls asleep with the “horrible and wrong feeling that it was better to get the hit than give it” (Burgess 1985, 123).

Alex’s transformation is almost a mirror image of the brutalization process that perpetrators of genocide and war crimes undergo. In such cases, soldiers learn to overcome their disgust and discomfort by adapting the moral principles that conflict with their actions. As a consequence, they eventually cease to feel bad. The theory behind the Ludovico technique is that Alex will eventually learn to be moral—a “true Christian”, as Dr. Brodsky puts it—because his intention to act violently will be “accompanied by strong feelings of physical distress.” Alex is “impelled
towards the good by, paradoxically, being impelled towards evil” (Burgess 1985, 128).

To avoid feeling sick, Alex has to stop even the imaginative act of violence. When Dr. Brodsky mentions that Alex would never hurt a fly, the mere thought of killing a fly makes Alex feel sick. To stop the physical discomfort, Alex imagines himself feeding the fly with bits of sugar and looking after it like a wounded pet (Burgess 1985, 131). In Alex’s own words, “this Ludovico stuff was like a vaccination and there it was cruising about in my krovvy,97 so that I would be sick always for ever and ever amen whenever I viddied98 any of this ultra-violence” (Burgess 1985, 120).

Alex is now seemingly cured of his violent tendencies and so released into the world. The story now follows the pattern of a classic folk tale. One by one, Alex meets his former adversaries. They take the opportunity and exact violent revenge upon him. He eventually falls into the hands of a political resistance group that wishes to exploit his condition to overthrow the government, but the government manages to counteract the plot. Alex is re-educated and weaned from the Ludovico technique. In the last scene he is back to his normal, violence-loving self.

The arc of the story touches upon one of the central points of this dissertation: moral condemnation is much more than a bodily response. After undergoing the Ludovico technique, Alex’s body responds automatically to violence with feelings of nausea and discomfort. But the physical discomfort is just a conditioned reflex and Alex has no moral objection to “good old ultra-violence”. He just feels too sick to perform it. In theory, the researchers could have conditioned Alex to feel physically sick at the sight and thought of any random category of events: Christmas carols, child birth or clapping.99

A Clockwork Orange is of course a work of fiction, but it seizes upon and accurately portrays a crucial fact about the nature of involuntary

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97 “Blood” in Nadsat.
98 “Looked” in Nadsat.
99 In reality, conditioning is more complicated than this. For a brief overview of this debate, see Inglis-Arkell 2014.
responses like disgust. Simply put, the mere bodily sensation of discomfort alone cannot convey moral perception. Instead such involuntary bodily responses function as vessels that can be hitched to a range of ideologies, value judgments, significances, and much more.

Sometimes the feeling of disgust and discomfort indicate a moral conflict or a bad conscience—it can serve as an internalized and embodied mechanism that makes us feel the constraining power of fundamental moral principles. This same intuition, we might presume, made the researchers develop the Ludovico technique. There is, however, nothing moral about Alex’s visceral response. The researchers cultivated a conditioned reflex, nausea, but did not change the underlying moral principles that govern Alex. Alex’s aversion to violence is not accompanied by any moral condemnation and is completely non-moral. As soon as he is brought back to his “normal” self at the end of the story, he is able to continue his history of violence.

**Politics of disgust**

The Ludovico technique may seem to us outlandish but we don’t have to look far to see the use of disgust as a pedagogical tool, to cultivate a proper human being. In Denmark for example, the last public execution was performed in 1882, ending an era during which school children attended public executions as part of their curriculum (Rasmussen 1986, 32).

In 1825, a young Hans Christian Andersen went to see the decapitation of a woman and two men, whose heads were put on spikes. The principal of his grammar school thought that this experience was an important part of the students’ education. Andersen recalls feeling shaken and alienated by the episode. Immediately after the execution, the executioners sat down to eat eel and drink liquor—the main concern of the “strangely insensitive” local peasants was that the nice clothing of the
executed was going to go to waste (Andersen 1926, 96–97; Andersen 1975, 87–88).

The sight of a decaying body hanging from the gallows was normal for Andersen’s contemporaries. In eighteenth century Denmark, public executions were fairly frequent—once a year an average peasant from the Zealand island could witness an execution within one day of travel—and the bodies were typically left hanging for years (Krogh 2000, 355). Executions were typically carried out on a high hill on the fringe of cities next to the busiest roads, to catch the attention of anyone passing by. On the busy main road from the harbor city Kalundborg to the capital Copenhagen, spanning about 100 kilometers, travelers would pass by at least six places of execution (Krogh 2000, 325).

From the brutal images of Purgatory in Gothic churches to educational pamphlets that advised parents to decorate the walls of their homes with pictures of torture chambers and executions, in order to instill fear and horror in their children, the belief in the edifying and disciplinary value of disgust runs deep in the European tradition, and beyond (Matthiessen 1962, 72). As I am writing, the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, has released a report on the history of lynchings in the United States, which documents almost 4,000 victims of “racial terror lynchings” in 12 Southern states from 1877 to 1950. These lynchings attracted enormous crowds, including children as documented in a vexing photograph from Downtown Dallas, 1910, where we see a black man hanging from a telephone pole. In the front of the massive crowd of people, two adolescent boys stare into the camera (Robertson 2015).

In parts of the world shaken by war and instability, disgust elicited by violence is still used to teach people a lesson, and these lessons are not reserved for one’s enemies. In the city of Raqqa, according to a recent report, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) likes to “make sure children witness beheadings and violence so as to get accustomed to it” (Birke 2015). Through their widely distributed videos of massacres, beheadings and
the like, ISIS publicizes their executions to both supporters and enemies, targeting anyone with an Internet connection.

While ISIS’s terror regime currently attracts most of the global attention, other countries including Saudi Arabia also endorse corporal punishments through flogging, the amputations of limbs and death by stoning (Atkinson and Donaghy 2015). Moreover, 57 countries still allow the death penalty, and 22 implemented the practice in 2013 (Amnesty International 2014, 3).

The public display of mutilated bodies is also a common strategy in genocides and other examples of systemic and organized mass violence. During the large-scale ethnically motivated massacres in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s and in Indonesia in the mid 1960s, perpetrators threw dead bodies in rivers to send a message to the local populations.

An embodied moral injury

Apart from the use of disgust as a political and educational tool, the themes of this study are also very much current in recent discourse about moral injury for the thousands of Western soldiers returned from Afghanistan and Iraq.

A group of American psychologists and physiatrists have advocated an interpretation of the returned soldiers’ bodily distress in moral terms. They argue that the diagnosis of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) does not accurately cover the depth of the moral distress and inner turmoil that veterans experience. PTSD is defined as a trauma that is primarily based on fear, but many soldiers come home with injuries and psychological problems that appear rooted in moral conflict and guilt (Litz et al. 2009, 696–697). As a result, reference to moral injury is intended to conceptualize the “lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent or bearing witness to acts that
transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations, that is, moral injury” (Litz et al. 2009, 697).100

In the context of the dissertation, the concept of moral injury is interesting because it recognizes that some of the bodily and emotional responses that are symptoms of PTSD can also be conceptualized in moral terms and not just as psychological and physiological responses. These symptoms may include a quickened heart rate or sweating that accompanies nightmares; frightening thoughts or flashbacks in which the soldier re-experiences the trauma; the bodily discomfort that the soldier associates with certain places, events or objects that remind him of the trauma; and last by not least, hyper-arousal symptoms such as being easily startled, feeling tense or “on edge”, being prone to angry outbursts, and having difficulty sleeping (National Institute of Mental Health 2014).

The case of Jonathan Millantz serves a concrete example of the grave consequences that moral injury can have. Millantz was a medic in Battalion 1-68 in Iraq in 2003. He was responsible for checking detainees vitals signs in their makeshift jail to, as he says, “make sure we weren’t killing them” (Phillips 2010, 113). Sleep deprivation, beatings, mock executions, and water boarding were routinely employed, and Millantz says he witnessed worse: “There’s plenty of stuff out there that hasn’t been put on the media that would make Abu Graib look like Disneyland”(Phillips 2010, 113). Watching over the torture, Millantz reports feeling “sick to his stomach”, but superiors discouraged him from reporting the acts of misconduct (Phillips 2010, 113).

Millantz not only witnessed the torture and provided treatment to the detainees—he eventually participated in the torture himself. Millantz took pictures of the tortured detainees and even sent a photograph to a friend back in the United States. In the photograph, Millantz and a lieutenant smile broadly alongside a prisoner in a white shirt soaked with sweat, wearing a pained expression while carrying a heavy wooden board. “That stupid son of a

100 See also the work done by Shay 1994, Phillips 2010 and Brock 2012 that focuses on the moral consequences of war for veterans.
bitch,” the back of the photo reads. “We eventually let him go. He’s been holding that board for 45 min. Notice the sweat stains on his man dress” (Phillips 2010, 194). The picture came with a letter:

Hutton,
What up Dawg? ... We tortured the shit out of some prisoners. It was funny as fuck. We put sandbags over their heads, and broke their thumbs. By accident of course. They killed two American Warrant Officers. We burn[ed] them with cigarettes. We mind fuck[ed them] by waking them up at all hours of the night. So how are you? ...
Peace,
Millantz (Phillips 2010, 195)

When Millantz returned from his service he suffered from severe PTSD. He attempted suicide on several occasions, and in April 2009 was found dead in his bed. He died from an overdose of painkillers, and his death was ruled accidental (Phillips 2010, 197–198). He had tried counseling, but confided in an interview that he doubted he would ever find closure: “I still can’t forgive myself for what I did to those poor people...It’s been hard over the years coming to terms with what actually happened over there” (Phillips 2010, 191).

With time to reflect on the radical transformation he had undergone in Iraq, Millantz suffered greatly from physical and mental distress. Millantz’s story is just one out of many. In 2012, the number of suicides among active-duty soldiers in United States, 177, exceeded the 176 who were killed in combat (Pilkington 2013). The suicide numbers are especially high for younger veterans (Zoroya 2014).

In this dissertation I have shown how moral and social principles can be embedded in our emotional and bodily response system, but many questions remain to be answered in future research on the subject. We need a better understanding of the dynamics at play in historical and contemporary politics
of disgust and distress, and also more research is needed on the influence of bodily and emotional responses on moral perception and moral judgment. The concept of moral injury deserves much more attention as an important step away from a non-moral interpretation of PTSD and toward a paradigm in which we take emotional responses more seriously, and recognize that a violation of fundamental moral principles may have a profound visceral impact on us.
Bibliography


Shouldn’t Be Morally Disgusted by Moral Disgust.” Topoi, February, 1–16. doi:10.1007/s11245-014-9240-0.


Dansk resumé

Nogle soldater oplever et stærkt følelsesmæssigt og fysisk ubehag (fx afsky, svimmelhed, kvalme og opkast) i det øjeblik, hvor de begår eller bevidner grusomheder. Denne afhandling leverer en systematisk undersøgelse af dette komplekse fænomen, som jeg kalder ”gerningsmandens afsky”. Den centrale kontrovers går på, om afskyen har en moralsk betydning. Indikerer den kropslige respons en subliminal erkendelse af det moralsk forkastelige i handlingen? Jeg argumenterer for, at gerningsmandens afsky i nogle tilfælde kan være tegn på en moralsk konflikt, uden at den nødvendigvis er udtryk for en dedikeret moralsk dom.


Både følelser og fornuft kan forvrænge vores dømmekraft, men jeg argumenterer for, at vi bør forestille os vores afsky som et stopskilt. Ifølge denne analogi bør vi hverken blindt adlyde afskynen eller afvise den som irrelevant. I stedet bør afskynen få os til at stoppe op og overveje om de værdier, som afskynen udtrykker, er i overensstemmelse med vores dedikerede moralske domme.
Abstract

Some soldiers experience strong emotional outbursts and bodily discomfort—such as disgust, dizziness, fainting, nausea, vomiting and crying—in the moment of committing or witnessing atrocities. This dissertation delivers a systematic examination of this complex phenomenon that I call “perpetrator disgust”. The central point of dispute is the moral significance of perpetrator disgust. Does the perpetrator’s bodily response indicate a subliminal awareness of the moral wrong of the act? I argue that perpetrator disgust can in some cases reflect a moral conflict, but warn against conflating it with a committed moral judgment.

To investigate the significance of perpetrator disgust, the dissertation broadens the discussion to cover similar emotional responses. Although disgust and vicarious distress—the discomfort we feel when witnessing someone in pain—are based in instincts and innate reflexes, these bodily responses are shaped and modulated by an agent’s social, moral and political upbringing. I therefore argue that bodily responses of disgust and distress primarily convey an agent’s agnostic moral judgment and not necessarily his or her committed moral judgment that is a result of deliberation. The bodily response points the agent’s awareness to some transgression but it is not itself moral. It is the agent’s internalized moral principles that dictate what he feels disgust or distress for, and not the other way around.

While acknowledging that both feelings and reason can distort our judgment, I argue that we should imagine disgust as a stop sign. In this analogy, we should neither obey our disgust responses blindly nor dismiss them as irrelevant. Instead disgust responses should impel us to stop and pay attention to the embodied values that these bodily responses convey in order to evaluate whether they are in alignment with our committed moral judgments.