



Book Review

Review: **Ditte Marie Munch-Juriscic**: *Perpetrator Disgust. The Moral Limits of Gut Feelings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2023.

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Since the Second World War, Western thinking has been confronted with an undeniable imperative to contribute to an understanding of the factors that facilitated the horrors and atrocities committed by the Nazi regime in general, and the Holocaust in particular. As part of a response to this imperative, philosophers have turned to the investigations of perpetrators to comprehend what can lead human beings not only to accept but also to participate in such large-scale atrocities. One field of interest is the phenomena that some perpetrators experience physical and emotional breakdowns in the course of committing atrocities, being overwhelmed by visceral forces of disgust, distress, discomfort and revulsion; an interest partly driven by the hope that such phenomena are signs of a fundamental and innate morality in humans. In the book *Perpetrator disgust. The moral limits of gut feelings*, Ditte Marie Munch-Juriscic groups these reactions under the heading of ‘perpetrator disgust’ and provides a comprehensive and nuanced examination of both these bodily responses and the ensuing research. However, according to this book, we should not get our hopes up: the perpetrators’ reactions do not express any inherent or natural morality. As is often the case, the explanation is rather more complex and less comforting.

Munch-Juriscic employs the term *perpetrator disgust* to cover ‘a range of bodily stress responses (dizziness, crying, nausea, vomiting, trembling, fainting and the like)’ (17) that perpetrators may experience. From the outset, she introduces the thesis that such reactions are easily manipulated and can be mobilised for both good and bad, suggesting that they are not necessarily indicative of a fundamental sense of morality. Against this backdrop, she examines the role of perpetrator disgust, what perpetrator disgust *does*; how these reactions influence and shape the way perpetrators perceive and understand the world. Her aim is ambitious, as she argues that the study of perpetrators may contribute to an understanding of the scope of human nature and lead to a re-evaluation of ‘our normative concept of a human being and its capabilities’ (10).

The methodological starting point of the book is a phenomenological tradition aiming to understand basic structures of the human consciousness, but doing so

from an examination of how perpetrator disgust manifests embedded in specific circumstances. The investigation is driven by a thorough engagement with empirical studies as well as cases such as eyewitness accounts and perpetrator testimonies. Munch-Juriscic is acutely aware of the potential unreliability of perpetrators' narratives, and she therefore offers in-depth analyses of the context and possible motivations behind presentations of particular cases. This investigation is in itself a contribution of the book – the discussion of how and for what reasons perpetrators tell their stories and the diverse factors that play into shaping these stories. Another notable aspect of the book is the incorporation of case studies from novels and films, which facilitates an exploration of the perpetrators' inner lives, unfolded with literary attention and fidelity towards reality, yet without eliciting suspicion of bias due to vested interests such as those stemming from actual involvement in atrocities. This highlights one of the book's many strengths: its highly reflective approach to methodology. The fact that it is written at the intersection between philosophy and other fields, such as empirical psychology and literature studies, lends credibility to the philosophical analysis and illustrates how philosophy can be both informed by and contribute to other disciplines.

The core of the book is dedicated to presenting and discussing four distinct frameworks for interpreting the phenomenon of perpetrator disgust. Advocates of the first perspective, known as the moral view, regard perpetrator disgust as the breakthrough of a natural moral reaction to transgressions committed by the perpetrators. Thus, perpetrator disgust is perceived as a moral resource, rooted either in our physical constitution or in specific empathetic emotions, even though such breakthroughs may be brief and seldom inspire to morally better actions. The moral view comes in two versions. According to some thinkers, moral responses need to be subjected to habituation and development, while other thinkers hold that the responses are in one sense or another innate. An example of the latter view is found in the work of historian Christopher Browning, who suggests that the physical and psychological breakdowns experienced by Nazis during the Second World War originate from some form of fundamental human instinct triggered in response to their own atrocities. Others propose a more modest idea: that part of what the Nazis needed to overcome was a natural repugnance towards crime and instinctive feelings of 'animal pity' towards victims, which would ordinarily constitute the fundamental building blocks of human morality. After an illuminating section on work on empathic stress in empirical psychology and evolutionary approaches to ethics that lends some support to this moral view of perpetrator disgust, Munch-Juriscic sums up that even if moral view is attractive in presenting human nature as essentially good and perpetrator disgust as representing moral judgement, there is scant evidence to suggest that these responses

guide perpetrators towards moral action or change for the better. Perpetrator disgust has, in Munch-Jurisc's favoured phrase, only limited 'pro-social' potential.

In Chapter 2, Munch-Jurisc turns her attention to a non-moral understanding of perpetrator disgust, beginning with a more detailed account of the phenomenon. She posits, based on recent research, that disgust responses have a cognitive aspect, involving an intentional engagement with the world, which warrants their classification as emotions rather than mere physiological reflexes. Moreover, empirical studies indicate that even if we are born with the capacity to feel disgust, the specific triggers of disgust are acquired through socialisation and cultural norms. This challenges the idea that perpetrator disgust is a distinctly moral response, and that it somehow springs directly from human nature. In discussing thinkers sceptical about the moral potential of disgust, Munch-Jurisc draws on evolutionary history approaches where disgust is theorised as an avoidance mechanism that, through evolution, acquired new social and moral functions. Because of this origin, disgust reactions function on a principle of 'better safe than sorry', which means that people may experience forms of disgust that they do not reflectively endorse. Even if disgust responses can influence and intensify moral judgement, they can also overwhelm us independently of, or in direct conflict with, our explicit moral judgements. Munch-Jurisc builds this into her own account, and she investigates how empathic distress, even if it is an innate capacity to feel with others, may both accord with and conflict with morality. Central to this is a finding from empirical psychology that an excess of empathy can be overwhelming and motivate us, not to care for, but rather to avoid or pacify a victim to relieve our own sense of discomfort. Empathic distress can thus be distorted into a primarily self-centred emotion that redirects and obstructs pro-social behaviour. It may even be central to committing certain forms of atrocities such as torture, and thus empathic distress also has only limited moral potential.

The focus of Chapter 3 is destructive interpretations of perpetrator disgust and empathic distress, according to which they may contribute to 'a hardening process that equip[s] soldiers with the capacity for killing' (99). Munch-Jurisc generally concurs with these views and thus explores various theories regarding the psychological mechanisms underlying this process. One theory suggests that a person's initial experience of a physiological distress in response to crimes done is followed by a secondary process where pleasurable feelings displace the initial distress reaction, which in turn may enable the perpetrator to derive enjoyment from their transgressions, leading to a process of brutalisation. Contrary to this, Munch-Jurisc argues that neither perpetrator disgust nor empathic distress should be seen as merely physiological reactions. She turns to cognitive dissonance theory, proposing that perpetrator disgust arises from a conflict between the perpetrators'

actions and their internal moral and social norms. To resolve this dissonance and align with external pressures, perpetrators alter the moral principles that conflict with their actions to overcome distress, which can lead to an escalation in their transgressions and violence. Munch-Jurisc points out that the awareness of such conflicting emotions in perpetrator organisations is revealed by various ways in which perpetrators are supported to manage and overcome emotional conflict. Perpetrator organisations often provide distractions such as parties and alcohol, or financial incentives, to help soldiers numb their emotional turmoil. Another strategy is to acknowledge and embrace the conflicting emotions of the soldiers, for example by assuring them that their reactions of perpetrator disgust to their own acts of murder or violence is a sign that their moral integrity is still in place. A third strategy is to dehumanise victims through projective disgust. Still, such processes of brutalisation are not irreversible and never total. When looking back at their actions, some perpetrators may eventually come to experience perpetrator disgust and feelings of guilt about what they have done, suggesting that destructive accounts of perpetrator disgust thus do not fully encapsulate the psychological complexities involved.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Munch-Jurisc's main claim that what is lacking in other interpretations is an understanding of how context – our social, cultural and political environment – shapes perpetrator disgust as well as emotions more generally. Against recent noncognitive theories of emotions, Munch-Jurisc restates her point that emotion can only be understood through the interplay of both cognitive and affective elements, and she then moves on to explore how context is crucial for an understanding of both elements. Munch-Jurisc makes an illuminating distinction between external and internal context. Regarding external context, she brings out how affects play into all of our interactions with the world, but that the social and cultural environment of a person influences how affects are transformed into unconscious physiological habits and a form of second nature. Affectual habits thus come to express norms of a person's society and subcultures as well as certain fundamental individual moral norms. The internal context of emotions is understood in terms of our *hermeneutical equipment*, the interpretive tools we rely on to understand the world and others. Most of the time, this hermeneutical equipment is both implicit and non-reflexive in use, but it can be made the object of scrutiny when causes arise – for example by reactions such as perpetrator disgust. Munch-Jurisc discusses the example of an officer on death row who, after a strong physical reaction to one specific execution, goes through a process of uncertainty and deliberation through which he eventually comes to change his moral evaluation of the death penalty, thus changing his hermeneutical equipment. What is important for Munch-Jurisc is that even if this change may be

spurred by perpetrator disgust, it depends on a process of reflection and change of motivation that is first truly effectuated when it is realised in action.

Munch-Juriscic concludes that feelings of disgust and discomfort may convey internalised moral values, but that they have only a 'merely signalling function' (167) of transgressions of values that may or may not be moral in character. The reason is that the values that shaped these responses and their moral potential can only be understood by attending to their context. There is thus no necessary connection between visceral feelings of perpetrator disgust and specifically moral motivation as moral judgement and motivation entails much more than bodily responses.

I hope that the presentation goes some way to reflect the thorough, thought-provoking and inspiring qualities of Munch-Juriscic's work, even if cannot fully do justice to the richness of the book. The scope of work and the range of disciplines with which Munch-Juriscic engages is breathtaking, and she does so in a way that is perceptive and loyal, but also critical when called for, just as her own contribution is substantial and developed with clarity and care.

Still, while I have no objections against the general arguments of the book and its conclusions, my reading left me with two puzzlements. One puzzlement arises from an inexplicable tension in the presentation of the relevance of the work done to our understanding of the human being. In a rather puzzling quote, Munch-Juriscic writes that 'I argue that perpetrators of mass atrocities are not like the rest of us. While they may once have been ordinary people (and may become ordinary again), their moral framework as perpetrators is radically changed. It is a naive projection to imagine perpetrators as people with similar emotional responses as you and I' (92–93). The quote is puzzling, because if perpetrators are not like 'ordinary people' – not like 'us' – we do not learn much about the human being from learning about perpetrators, which seems to be contrary also to Munch-Juriscic's own ambitions. It also seems to be contrary to what her work actually shows, namely that perpetrators are, in some sense, very just like 'us', as the changes of moral framework and emotional responses necessary for committing atrocities are possible for very ordinary people, given the right context. So, it would be more precise to say that we should not imagine that perpetrators have the same moral framework and emotional responses as ordinary people (which is maybe not that surprising), but that any one of us could come to develop such problematic frameworks and responses given the right – or, rather, wrong – context. It is important to keep this point clearly in view if we are not to be led to the (rather self-serving) conclusion that perpetrators are in some way a strange, 'other' kind of people. As Munch-Juriscic herself concludes: It is all about context!

Another puzzlement is that it seems to me that the book has a form of blind spot concerning any suggestions of constructive moral potential of perpetrator disgust and empathic distress. Munch-Jurisc continuously shows how these reactions do not *necessarily* lead to pro-social action and can be used to enforce processes that go against such action, and she seems to assume that they therefore cannot be morally conducive and contribute to pro-social action. To give an example: one theory suggests that because feelings of guilt are socialised and cognitive and thus cannot be overwritten by bodily responses, they may function as a moderating factor in brutalisation processes. Munch-Jurisc dismisses this suggestion simply by noting that in the cases considered, guilt does not lead to action, because soldiers are at the same time placed within a hierarchy and ideology in which their atrocities seemed justified. However, and here lies my general point: the fact that seeds of pro-social motivation stemming from an emotion can be overridden in particular contexts does not mean they are without moral potential altogether, but this possibility is rarely pursued in the book. One way to bring out this point is that Munch-Jurisc never addresses the obvious fact because of her choice of examples, the case against perpetrator disgust and empathic distress is in a certain sense ‘rigged’. Most of the case material is taken from contexts constituted by some of the worst perpetrator organisations in history, especially Nazi Germany, and as such, the cases are perfect material to investigate how perpetrator disgust and empathic distress *fails* to lead to pro-social action. But in order to get the full story about whether perpetrator disgust may have a moral potential, we would also need to consider case material where these emotions appear in contexts less totalising in overriding all spurs towards pro-social actions – such as the case of the death row officer.

These reflections do not in any way detract from the obvious qualities of the book. In fact, they are in line with Munch-Jurisc’s conclusions that external and internal context is crucial for how our emotions connect with moral motivation. This is an important insight of her work, and I can only recommend that anyone interested in the complicated relations between moral motivation and perpetrator disgust as well as emotions more generally should get hold of the book, dig in and get wiser.