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# Indeterminacy in Emotion Perception: Disorientation as the Norm

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## Abstract

Most psychological and philosophical theories assume that we know what we feel. This general view is often accompanied by a range of more specific claims, such as the idea that we experience one emotion at a time, and that it is possible to distinguish between emotions based on their cognition, judgment, behaviour, or physiology. One common approach is to discriminate emotions based on their motivations or ultimate goals. Some argue that empathic distress, for instance, has the potential to motivate empathic concerns; personal distress, on the other hand, is self-oriented and motivates egoistic concerns. In this paper, I argue against this and similarly teleological views of emotions and affect. Through a close study of the emotional breakdown of an American drone operator, I make the case that understanding our emotions entails much more ambiguity than dominant theories assume. In our emotional lives, disorientation and confusion are often the norm.

**Keywords:** basic emotions, distress, moral injury, ambiguity, indeterminacy, motivation

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the philosophical and psychological literature on emotions, a prevailing assumption is that we know what we feel. This general view is often accompanied by a range of more specific claims, such as the idea that we experience one emotion at a time, or at least that one emotion is always felt more strongly than another. This is, for example, a standing assumption in most thinking that aligns with some version of the basic emotion theory.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, each emotion has certain defining features such that it is possible to distinguish one from another based on their associated cognition, judgement, behaviour, or physiology (Lench, Flores, and Bench 2011: 61; Kurth 2022: 61). Theorists disagree on how exactly to individuate emotions

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent defence of this prevalent view in the study of emotions, see Keltner et al. 2019; Scarantino and Griffiths 2011.

but, for many, these differences are not just epistemological but metaphysical and ontological facts about the world. For such thinkers, there exist distinct and clearly demarcated kinds of emotions—sometimes conceived as natural kinds—which we can track through biological, physiological markers like facial expressions, neural mechanisms, and behaviour patterns (Hutto, Robertson, and Kirchhoff 2018; Ekman 1992).

One common approach has been to distinguish emotions based on their motivations (Lench, Flores, and Bench 2011: 838; Kurth 2022: chap. 2.4). Psychologist Daniel Batson, for example, argues that the distress we feel over someone's suffering is *either* empathic distress or personal distress, vicariously induced. From his perspective, we can distinguish these two emotions based on their "ultimate goals" (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987; Batson 2009). Empathic distress has the potential to motivate empathic concerns; personal distress is self-oriented, motivating only egoistic concerns. In this paper, I argue against this and similar teleological views of emotions and affect grounded in assumptions that rudimentary, physiological responses like distress have a specific direction or end goal.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, there is a significant amount of ambiguity in how we experience our emotional lives. Often, we interpret our emotional experiences through multiple explanations that may conflict and change over time. For a significant range of experiences, emotional indeterminacy is the norm. To portray emotion perception as something that happens through a single, distinct emotion concept is a theoretical construct, devised in philosophy books and experimental psychology labs, and not grounded in lived experience.

In Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" (1914), the poet explores the theme of boundaries, questioning their necessity and function. The poem's narrator and his neighbour meet every spring to mend the stone wall between their properties. While his neighbour maintains that "Good fences make good neighbors," the narrator doubts the need for the wall, and muses on the natural forces that topple the stones year after year: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down."

For the purposes of this paper, this something that resists our neat constructions is our affective and emotional lives. As philosophers and psychologists, we try to make sense of emotions with categories, names, and distinctions, but the nature of emotions and our affective responses continues to remain theoretically obscure (Leys 2017). Of course, we sometimes experience emotions in straightforward ways—"I'm just so happy!" we exclaim—but standard theories of emotion fail us in the many cases where ambiguity and ambivalence are present, when we are not quite sure what we feel. This is easy to demonstrate when we remove ourselves from the realm of theory and study emotions in context.

To ensure a focused discussion in service of the broader point, I make my case by centring on the feeling of distress we experience at the suffering of others. Many psychological and philosophical theories have attempted to categorise this particular affective state, but here I focus primarily on the account of experimental psychologist Daniel C. Batson and colleagues, who conceptualise this affective state within a teleological account of emotions and affect, distinguishing between emotions according to specific end goals (Section 1).

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3 Teleological views of emotions are found across a wide spectrum of theories in philosophy and psychology. They come in different variations and do not form a uniform school of thought, but what they share is the metaphysical assumption that emotions have some form of purpose or endgoal. From this perspective, there exist distinct emotions with a core motivating feature, and that the meaning of the emotion is derived from this feature. For Andrea Scarantino, for example, each emotion involves specific action tendencies that motivate us (Scarantino 2014). Appraisal theory points to the idea of core relational themes which distinguish each emotion (Lazarus 1991). But the broader idea—that each emotion should be characterised and evaluated according to their motivational features—is widespread. See for example normative debates on what constitutes the core motivational features of anger in Silva 2021a.

I next consider an example of emotion perception through the distress and disorientation experienced by an American drone analyst, Chris Aaron (Section 2), and demonstrate the insufficiency of Batson's framework in understanding such a case. I then turn to philosophers Peter Goldie and Hannah Arendt to argue that emotion perception is a process without a determinate endpoint, and that disorientation is a fundamental, constitutive feature of human nature and ethical life, which must be taken seriously in any convincing theory of emotions (Sections 3–5). As the case of the drone analyst may in some respects be considered exceptional, I also include a discussion of more ordinary examples of disorientation in emotion perception.

To be clear, what follows is an argument dedicated to the first-person perspective, and how we come to understand our own emotions. But it is not just an epistemological argument. What emotions are (their ontology or metaphysics) cannot be separated from the way we perceive them.

Emotion perception as such is not merely characterised by *ambivalence*, that is, it is not that the emotion concepts are epistemically accessible, but that we do not know which one to choose from. Nor is emotion perception merely characterised by *ambiguity*, where we do not know what we are feeling at a given time, but that we could do so were the specific, distinct emotion categories to become available.<sup>4</sup> Even beyond these specific obstacles, I argue that it is often entirely indeterminate what a bodily feeling means. It is our interpretation of the feeling that gives it content, meaning, and moral motivation (Barrett 2017; 2022). In such cases, bodily feelings do not determinately reveal or mean any one thing. We make sense of our physiological distress and other emotions by the application of hermeneutic equipment availed by our environment (Munch-Juriscic 2021; 2022: chap. 4).

## 2. A Teleological Account of Distress<sup>5</sup>

Why do we feel distress when we witness or hear about the suffering of another? The question has occupied philosophers for centuries, but psychologists began to explore it in laboratory experiments during the middle of the twentieth century. Simner and colleagues, for example, found that human beings are born with the capacity to feel vicarious distress. They observed how newborns became upset and started crying when they were exposed to the crying of other infants, but not when they were exposed to a recorded version of their own cry. This early reactive crying is a primitive and innate arousal mechanism that disappears in the first half year of the infant's development. The capacity to feel distress over the suffering of others remains intact, but whose suffering the child reacts to, and how they are motivated to respond to it, will depend on the child's cognitive development and the social and moral commitments it picks up from its environment (Simner 1971; Hoffman 2000: 65).

The literature on vicarious distress is vast.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, the key point is that some psychologists conceive of vicarious distress within a teleological model of emotion. Developmental psychologist Martin Hoffman, for example, argues that the capacity to feel vicarious distress is a precursor to the capacity to feel empathic concern (Hoffman 2000). For this reason, Hoffman speaks only of "empathic distress"; for him, this affective state is meant to develop into empathic concern and has a prosocial function. From this perspective, the capacity has an inherent moral direction that may be distorted or thwarted by egoistic or antisocial concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Marco Viola for encouraging me to specify this point.

<sup>5</sup> This section builds on research from chapters 2 and 3 in my book *Perpetrator Disgust: The Moral Limits of Gut Feelings* (2022). ). Because of copyright restrictions, this particular section is excluded from the open access license. Thank you to Oxford University Press for the right to reproduce parts of my previous arguments.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of this literature, see Maibom 2014a.

Experimental psychologist Daniel Batson also proposes a teleological account of vicarious distress, though he divides the emotional landscape in a different way than Hoffman. In his view, we can differentiate between different *kinds* of distress based on their ultimate goals.<sup>7</sup> *Personal distress* is vicariously induced distress (i.e. triggered by others), but is fundamentally self-centred, an emotion that directs the agent's attention inwards, to oneself and one's own needs (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987: 19–22).<sup>8</sup> *Empathic concern*, on the other hand, is not just triggered by others, but is directed toward the suffering of the other, and entails a prosocial concern and a motivation to alleviate the other's pain. Despite their crucial differences, both Hoffman and Batson's research relies on the teleological idea that certain affective states have an inherent direction towards a specific emotion, accompanied by a distinct motivation. For researchers like Batson, this implies that we can distinguish between emotions (and their accompanying affective states) based on characteristics that speak to their ultimate goals.

How exactly are we supposed to make such distinctions and discern different kinds of distress? To demonstrate that vicarious distress and empathic concern 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, such as stories of tragic car accidents or a video of a woman being exposed to increasingly painful shocks (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987: 29). The subjects were then asked to report how they felt during the experiment through a multiple-choice questionnaire with a list of adjectives to choose from. If the subjects indicated feeling “alarmed, grieved, upset, worried, disturbed, perturbed, distressed, and troubled,” Batson and his colleagues inferred they felt personal distress. If they ticked “sympathetic, moved, compassionate, tender, warm, and softhearted”, the researchers inferred that they felt empathic concern. In another set of experiments, researchers tested the subjects' responses to appeals for help. The general conclusion from these experiments was that 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 and empathic concern.

Even in these first experiments, which laid the foundation for decades of further research, an important irregularity appeared. When hearing some of these stories, subjects ticked emotion words that expressed *both* empathic concern and personal distress. To account for these irregularities, Batson and his colleagues were forced to concede that, in some need situations, personal distress and empathy are closely intertwined (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987: 29).

This concession is crucial. Batson's experiments set out to demonstrate that there was no prosocial potential in vicariously induced feelings of personal distress, and that true empathic concern only springs from feelings of empathic distress. But the experiments demonstrated that vicariously induced distress can be simultaneously self-centred and other-concerned.<sup>9</sup> When people were exposed to the shocking scenarios of other people suffering, they felt a range of emotions with different and conflicting motivational states, and they would have likely reported an even wider diversity of emotion words, had Batson's experiments opted for an open-ended model of questioning.<sup>10</sup>

7 In a more recent publication Batson clarifies that his reference to ultimate goals is related primarily to motivation: “‘Ultimate’ refers to means–end relations, not to a metaphysical first or final cause, and not to biological function. An ultimate goal is an end in itself. In contrast, an instrumental goal is a stepping stone on the way to an ultimate goal” (Batson 2014: 43).

8 Here I rely on Batson's foundational experiments. For a more recent version of the same, see Batson 2009. It is important to note that Batson does not argue that prosocial behaviour is necessarily moral behaviour.

9 See also Maibom's discussion of this point (2014b: 7–10).

10 For examples of such open-ended experimental set-ups, see Hoemann et al. 2020; Betz, Hoemann, and Barrett 2019.

The central point is that, in concrete instances of emotional states (and not neatly isolated, abstract examples), it is inherently difficult to distinguish between different kinds of emotional states. Importantly, this is not just Batson's problem. Any theory of emotion that proposes to classify emotions into singular categories must grapple with this fact. Most philosophical and psychological theories of emotions assume that the intentionality of an emotion is clear. In other words, they assume that we can determine what a subject feels distress towards, how the subject experiences this distress (as self- or other regarding), and the action that the emotion motivates.<sup>11</sup> But if we assume this kind of transparency, we risk basing our interpretations on a distorted and skewed understanding of our emotional lives (Maibom 2014b: 7). In fact, as we explore in a moment, the phenomenological experience of our emotional responses is diverse and often based on conflicting emotions, affective and physiological experiences that we find hard to understand and interpret. Because of the indeterminate character of these emotional and physiological experiences, agents often do not know exactly why they feel distressed, or what their distress is directed at.

### 3. "My Hands Stopped Working": Making Sense of Distress

Chris Aaron joined the drone program as a 24-year-old, out of curiosity. When he first saw a Predator drone unleash its lethal payload, he found it surreal and awe-inspiring (Press 2021: 100). He recalls feeling thrill and "a surge of adrenaline" as he saw the "the camera zooming in, the laser locking on, a plume of smoke rising above the scorched terrain where the missile struck" (Press 2021: 100). Afterwards he exchanged congratulatory high fives with the other analysts in the room. From 2004 and onwards, he worked for different agencies and contractors. But one day in 2010 he experienced something strange as he mulled the terms of a new job opportunity:

He began to fall apart physically. The distress began with headaches, night chills, joint pain, a litany of flu-like symptoms that, every few weeks, would recur. Soon, more debilitating symptoms emerged: waves of nausea, eruptions of skin welts, chronic digestive problems. Chris had always prided himself on his physical fitness. Now, suddenly, he felt frail and weak, to the point that working for the contractor was out of the question. "I could not sign the paperwork," he said. Every time he sat down to try, "my hands stopped working—I was feverish, sick, nauseous." (Press 2021: 101)

He eventually moved back to live with his parents, very unwell; his friends were barely able to recognise him—"It wasn't the same guy" (Press 2021: 114). Doctors could not specify a diagnosis, so he began experimenting with fasting, yoga, and Chinese medicine. His days were spent in a "fog of doom," and at night he had nightmares about innocent people being maimed and killed. One recurring dream was akin to the infamous aversion therapy scenes in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Stuck in a chair, unable to avert his gaze, Aaron was forced to watch scenes of violence unfold up close: "It was as though my brain was telling me: Here are the details that you missed out on," he said. "Now watch them when you're dreaming" (Press 2021: 101–2). The hardest part for Aaron was to reckon with the feelings of joy he had experienced as a drone pilot. He had enjoyed the power that came with his position. It had been exciting. But in the years that followed, his mood darkened:

He withdrew, sinking into a prolonged funk shadowed by shame and grief. He avoided seeing friends. He had no interest in intimate relationships. He struggled with quasi-suicidal thoughts, he told me, and with facing the depth and gravity of his wounds, a reckoning that began in earnest only in 2013

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11 As this line of argument suggests, my criticism targets not only teleological theories of emotions, but any theory that takes for granted that the intentionality of an emotional episode is always clear and transparent. I will reserve this discussion of intentionality for another occasion.



when he made his way to the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, to attend a veterans' retreat run by a former machine gunner in Vietnam (Press 2021: 119–20).

At the veteran's retreat, Aaron finally felt capable of discussing his feelings. He was, for example, able to talk about the strategic use of "diffusion of responsibility" in the drone pilot program, which aimed to mitigate feelings of personal responsibility that individual operators felt for their actions. But Aaron *did* feel responsible and culpable, and began to interpret his feelings as a form of *moral injury* (Press 2021: 120). Like many other veterans, he found the diagnostic concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to be insufficient to cover the range of complex feelings and moral uneasiness that he experienced (Boudreau 2011; Litz et al. 2009).

What significance should we assign to the initial shaking that Aaron experiences in the course of his physiological breakdown? From journalist Eyal Press's narrative, it is tempting to characterise the shaking as a form of *moral* distress, maybe even a moral reckoning, especially because Press couples this with Aaron's more explicit forms of shame and guilt that only become explicit later in the process. Should we understand his body as sending a message? Is the shaking an attempt to communicate some deep moral truth, or the voice of his conscience?<sup>12</sup> As I will argue in the remainder of this paper, it is crucial to refrain from such conjectures. Though they may be tempting to draw, such conclusions project values on indeterminate physiological distress, offering teleological interpretations of Aaron's emotional turmoil. Instead, we must begin by recognising that Aaron was for a very long time in a state of complete disorientation about the meaning of his physiological distress. In his own recounting it was not until 2013—three years after the first episode of shaking—that he would begin to engage in a more explicit form of moral reckoning about his actions.

In the initial moments when he began to shake and feel ill, he was certainly experiencing some form of acute *conflict*, but it would be an overinterpretation to conclude at this point that his distress contained a pre-determined moral direction. In a state of conflict and confusion, Aaron was fundamentally unclear about how to account for his experience and its implications. Eventually, at the veteran's retreat, when Aaron began to interpret his initial physiological distress as a *moral* distress, his interpretation was aided by the specific context of the veteran's retreat and the novel hermeneutic tools that it made available to him. Aaron finds a form of closure in the concept of moral injury and the adjoining therapeutic practices that he is offered. But, as we explore further in the following section, it is crucial not to see Aaron's story within a teleological framework of emotion, in which the construct of moral injury is seen as the sole, inevitable interpretation of Aaron's initial physiological state—as if his final feelings of compunction, guilt, and shame were already present as seeds within his initial physiological distress.<sup>13</sup> Already in 2008, when he was applying for his second job, Aaron experienced a similar

12 For a discussion of the moral value of uncontrollable affect in similar cases, see Charlie Kurth's discussion of the physical discomfort that 18<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist John Woolman felt when he had to write a bill of sale for an enslaved woman (Kurth 2018b: 185).

13 Whether or not the construct of moral injury should be considered a diagnosis is a controversial topic among scholars and clinicians studying the phenomenon. As the inventors of the Moral Injury Scale (MIOS) put it in a recent review article: "The concept of moral injury has recently emerged in the research literature as a separate aspect of trauma exposure, distinct from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moral injury is not classified as a mental disorder. It is a dimensional problem that can have profound effects on critical domains of emotional, psychological, behavioral, social, and spiritual functioning" (Litz and Kerig 2019: 99). For now, scholars such as Litz and Kerig argue that moral injury is not a unique diagnosis because it is not distinct enough from PTSD. They believe a slightly amended version of the DSM-5's definition of PTSD will be able to account for moral injury (through the new definition of complex PTSD). Like other scholars, I believe the phenomenology of moral injury is inadequately captured by the causal model of PTSD, and better understood as an ethical and moral struggle beyond psychological models (Boudreau 2011; Molendijk 2018; Wiinikka-Lydon 2017; 2019; 2022). Moreover, I see the current conceptualization of moral injury as a time-specific, hermeneutic equipment with its own inherent normativity, which is comparable, albeit not similar, to constructs like "partisan hysteria" from other contexts (Antić 2016: chap. 5).

physiological disruption, which he did not interpret through a moral lens. During a lie detector test, he lost circulation in his arm. Feeling hectored by the questions, he abruptly left the examination and took a motorcycle trip to Alaska, where he stayed at a monastery on a small island. Once he ran out of money, he returned to work for his previous employer, which again sent him to Afghanistan (Press 2021: 112–3). In this instance, too, Aaron’s physiological discomfort was surely an indication of some form of conflict, which prompted him to withdraw and reflect. Aaron’s retreat to a monastery certainly suggests that he was engaged in some form of soul-searching. But his choice to return to work as a drone pilot is an important indication that he, at this point, had not settled on an explicitly moral interpretation of his distress.

We cannot say that Aaron’s interpretation of his first episode of distress, not marked by an explicit moral interpretation, is any less true than the later one. Physiological feelings do not have any moral meaning unto themselves; agents impart this meaning when they reflect on their experiences and endow them with moral significance. With time, in grappling with his distress, Aaron’s search for a convincing interpretation ultimately comes to colour it through a specific lens of moral injury.

## 4. Emotion Perception as Decision Making

The example of Chris Aaron suggests that emotion perception may not be as straightforward and legible as most theories of emotions tend to assume. Aaron’s situation is, however, rare and even extreme, and may not necessarily be representative of the way we experience our emotions on an everyday basis. I will return to address this objection in the next section, but let’s bracket this concern for the moment, and consider in more detail why teleological models of emotion cannot adequately make sense of cases like Aaron’s—i.e., cases where agents do not always know what they are feeling, and where their process of understanding their own emotions and physiological states may be extensive and inconclusive. My alternative reading of Aaron’s case suggests that there are not distinct kinds of physiological distress with ultimate end goals, only different ways to understand our distress by making it meaningful to ourselves and others.

From this perspective, emotion perception is not about discovering what a specific feeling is really about (i.e., finding its true inherent meaning and intentionality) or what it *reveals* in the typical language of basic emotion theories (Ekman 2003). Making sense of our emotions is more akin to making an interpretive decision. As philosopher Peter Goldie puts it:

One’s own psychological states are not revealed to one in a pellucid way, especially at a time of mental turmoil: one’s reasons do not come with their precise weights already established; one’s feelings do not come with a precise attitude and content already in place. (Goldie 2012: 147)

The idea here is that emotion perception is not a matter of discovery (of some inherent moral trait or potential in the affective response), but rather a decision we arrive at.<sup>14</sup> Goldie readily concedes that the metaphor of deciding (of bestowing weights) is question-begging when we apply it to emotions, and cases of inner turmoil, like Aaron’s, “where nothing is settled, least of all one’s conception of oneself and one’s appropriate life” (Goldie 2012: 147). In such times of conflict and confusion, it does not feel like we are able to make any kind of decisions:

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<sup>14</sup> Goldie borrows this idea from Richard Moran: “Sometimes, making up your mind when in a state of confusion can be not so much a matter of discovery, of finding out what you think is right, but rather a decision” (Moran 2001: 57–60, quoted in Goldie 2012: 146).

Our agency is threatened at these times, as if we are not in control of our destiny; action seems passive, as if the surface of consciousness is being moved by some other deeper force, some tectonic plate below the surface. . . . At these times, just because one's mind is in a mess, one cannot say precisely what is going on in it. (Goldie 2012: 147)

But at some point, as Goldie puts it, “out of this mess emerges something that is, finally, more or less settled” (Goldie 2012: 148). Aaron, as we have considered, begins to understand his initial distress as the first sign of the guilt and shame he eventually comes to confront. It may certainly feel like he is discovering the true moral value of those initial feelings, but we should be cautious of echoing such autobiographical narratives and their reconstruction of events. Goldie warns that individuals construct such narratives to “explain what happened, to find agency and internal meaningfulness, precisely where it is not to be found” (Goldie 2012: 148). However productive and meaningful such narratives may be, they are constructed by us, and do not reflect some objective, tangible truth about our affective states.

The central problem that Goldie identifies is that we often end up construing our “past thoughts, feelings, and deliberations as more determinate than they in fact were” (Goldie 2012: 148). We project meaning onto our past actions, feelings, and thoughts because “we cannot bear the thought that there is no narrative explanation available of what happened in a way that provides internal meaningfulness” (Goldie 2012: 148).<sup>15</sup>

A consequence of this view of emotion perception is that the mere conceptualisation (articulation, understanding) of a distress response as a specific emotion is always normative. When we make sense of our emotions, the process is never purely descriptive, i.e., a matter of finding out which emotion we are feeling (Goldie 2009: 2).<sup>16</sup> Again, emotions are not distinct objects that are waiting to be discovered and named correctly by agents. To make sense of their emotions, agents draw on whatever hermeneutic equipment—concepts, scripts, emotion words—is available in their specific cultural, political, and social environment. The words we apply to our emotions serve as the interpretative lens that colours our experience with specific values, and motivate us accordingly.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, the fitness of an emotion concept to a situation depends on the individual agent and their broader context. As we have seen in the case of Chris Aaron, our understanding of an emotion may also change over time. The first time Aaron felt his arm go numb during the lie detector test, he withdrew from the application process but ultimately returned to Afghanistan. On this occasion, he did not end up interpreting his physiological stress with moral certainty. Or, if his moral concerns were emergent, he did not sustain them with decisive action. Later at the veteran's retreat, in a new environment, upon reflection and with a new range of interpretative frames, he settled on a moral interpretation of his stress.

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15 See also Susan Neiman's argument that we not only expect the world to be intelligible in a theoretical sense but also require that the world is intelligible in a practical and moral sense. For this reason, we expect agents to be able to make their actions intelligible for us (Neiman 2002).

16 For a fully fleshed-out argument for why any kind of emotion perception is normative, at least in a minimal operative sense (Loidolt 2018), see Munch-Jurisc 2021; 2022: chap. 4.

17 Importantly, in many everyday emotional experiences we do not explicitly reflect on, or name, our emotional experience with words. This naming process (where we are hunting for the right words) emerges when we are asked how we feel or when we are in doubt. Nonetheless, the emotion concepts we have previously encountered and learned still serve as an implicit form of heuristics (fast forms of thinking, like biases) even though these concepts and ideas may not be phenomenologically salient in the immediate moment that we put them to use (Munch-Jurisc 2022: chap. 4). Emotion perception in human adults is therefore always mediated by the influence of the culture that surrounds them. Thank you to Laura Silva for helping me articulate this.



What this alternative reading suggests is that the ontology of what we call “emotions” cannot be separated from their epistemology. This reading is in line with the construction view of emotions, which also argues that the way in which we perceive an affective or physiological state, and which names we attribute to it, are what constitute an emotion (Barrett 2017). In the earlier discussion of reactive crying, we observed that the ability to feel vicarious distress, i.e. to respond to other people’s suffering, is an emotional resonance mechanism, rooted in innate capacities. But the triggers of our affective responses—as well as who we empathise with—will depend on the values and political and social commitments that individuals internalise from their environments (Bloom 2018: 31; Munch-Juriscic 2020). Values and motivations are not, as theories like Batson’s suggest, embedded in affective and physiological impulses. Instead, our innate emotional capacities serve as templates that a broad range of values, morals, and ideologies can occupy (Munch-Juriscic 2022: chaps. 4–5).

## 5. Disorientation as the Norm?

In this paper I propose that indeterminacy is a core part of emotion perception, and that the disorientation that Chris Aaron experiences is much more normal than standard theories of emotions assume. To be fair, traditional emotion theory certainly *can* account for disorientation and confusion in emotion perception, but such states typically only figure as exceptions, aberrations, or temporarily points of transition. This is also Goldie’s perspective, whose focus is on situations of crisis where human beings have not made up their minds yet. Some readers may therefore still be sceptical. Is the physiological distress that Chris Aaron experiences not an anomaly? Do we not tend to experience emotions directly, clearly, and transparently? In fact, we often do not. In the following section, I will establish that disorientation is, if not the norm, a key component in our emotional lives.

At any given moment in time, even when we are resting and sleeping, the heart is beating, blood is pumping through our veins, and our breaths follow a certain rhythm. We are rarely consciously aware of these basic bodily functions, but they remain present, working in the background to ensure a well-functioning body. Abrupt changes in these bodily sensations will trigger our attention and prompt us to set out smaller or bigger theories about why we are feeling a particular way. A sharp sting in the stomach may be an indication of hunger, a dry mouth an indication of thirst, and so on. Researchers agree that interoception, the ability to sense and pick up on these basic bodily rhythms and cues, is fundamental for human health. Without a well-functioning interoceptive sense we risk jeopardising basic metabolic processes that are foundational for any living organism (Berntson, Gianaros, and Tsakiris 2018; Quigley et al. 2021). Interoceptive awareness is also a core feature of how we experience our own emotional life, but there are multiple ways that we can theorise our rudimentary bodily feelings.

A couple years ago, I asked one of my students if she would be interested in presenting her independent research at a public event. For several days I did not hear back from her, and in the eventual email she declined the invitation. She had several good practical reasons for why she could not attend, but she also told me that she felt very nervous at the thought of such a performance. The feeling made her doubt her academic skills and whether she would be able to carry out such a lecture. Here we have a very ordinary example of emotional discomfort, where it is truly impossible to give an objective explanation of the student’s feelings. I suggested it was completely normal to feel nervous at the prospects of a public performance and assured her that this should not be interpreted as sign that she was not fit for academia. But this suggestion was no less normative, and no more true, than her own initial interpretation. Or, put differently, the student’s nervousness did not

come with an underlying meaning that could be uncovered or discovered. As Lisa Feldman Barrett would put it, we don't simply identify feelings; we construct them (Barrett 2017).

Academic life abounds with such disorienting feelings. When receiving criticism or feedback on our work, we may experience a blur of emotions such as defensiveness, self-doubt, anger, or gratitude; when we receive compliments or praise, we may also find ourselves diverging between gratitude, humility, self-doubt, or imposter syndrome. And feelings of disorientation are certainly not confined to the domain of academic work. Surely, the feeling of being nervous is one of the most ordinary and rudimentary human feelings we can think of. When we are nervous, we may begin to sweat, our stomach twinges, the heart races, and we may even begin to shake as Chris Aaron reported. But this nervousness can be understood through a wide range of interpretations. Each interpretation (or emotion concept) we apply implicitly contains a set of normative ideas about how we *should* be responding to, or acting because of, such an emotional state. In any major life transition, such as graduating from college, embarking on a new career, or getting to know a new partner, we find ourselves overwhelmed with nervousness, which prompts us to conjure tentative guesses about why we feel this way. Our attempts at grasping our emotional lives are often confused, resulting in multiple, conflicting, and contradictory interpretations, and therefore also multiple roads of actions we can embark on.

Let us return to the core focus of this article, namely the specific feeling of distress that we feel when we witness someone suffering. One of the most common such instances is the distress of new parents when they try to comfort their upset newborn, a feeling common among human beings and many other mammals. The prolonged wailing of newborns is intense and nearly impossible to ignore. Recall that the ability to feel vicarious distress is a spontaneous emotional resonance mechanism, rooted in innate capacities. In fact, one theory is that the capacity to relate to others' distress evolved exactly for the purpose of parenting (Decety and Lamm 2006; Zahavi and Rochat 2015; Preston and de Waal 2002).

What exactly are parents feeling in those tense, stressful moments when it is impossible to soothe their crying child? Is there any way we can objectively pin down what their distress really means or, in Batson's terms, what ultimate goal their emotional state motivates? Their distress is surely vicariously induced, and their intention certainly prosocial: they wish to wish to console the child. But new parents also feel tired, frustrated, even angry, inadequate as a caregiver, guilty, or ashamed before the gaze of others if they are in a public space. To what extent does it make sense to categorise this jumble of feelings—all of which are taking place simultaneously—as primarily self- or other-directed? It is not possible to obtain a bird's eye perspective on what feeling is *really* at stake in these tense moments, or to point out their one true motivational trajectory.<sup>18</sup> What parents eventually end up doing is the product of an active choice, often aided by advice they pick up from their surroundings. One piece of common advice, for example, is to leave the infant in the crib for a moment if one feels helpless and overwhelmed. But even if a parent construed their agitation as anger and recognised the need to step away or call for help, we should not conclude that this reveals an egoistic and antisocial affective state. We cannot assume an exclusive bond between anger and certain motivational tendencies (Cameron, Lindquist, and Gray 2015; Silva 2021a).

In the various cases discussed above, though our conflicting and disorienting feelings may pull us in different directions, we are never at their mercy. Our emotions may be puzzling and difficult to decipher, even conflicting, but they are not distinct entities waiting to be discovered. The interpretations we arrive at, our

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<sup>18</sup> As plenty of research has made clear, vicarious distress in and of itself does not merely motivate prosocial behaviour (Munch-Jurisc 2022: chap. 2).

expressions and explanations to friends, are a sort of choice, an emphasis on one set of explanations in favour of another. Of course, we need shared concepts, names, and words to communicate with and understand each other—“Good fences make good neighbors,” the neighbour in Frost’s poem maintains—but the concepts that have been so defined (e.g. happy, sad, angry, disgusted) do not refer to distinct ontological or natural categories (Barrett 2017). They are shared, hermeneutic resources with which we cultivate our emotional well-being and a well-functioning social world.

## 6. The Value of Disorientation

Something there is that does not love a wall, which defeats our fences and resists our attempts at categorisation. In many everyday situations, we are left wondering what we feel and why. This lack of determinateness is a fundamental, constitutive feature of our emotional lives. It can inspire us to think of new and better ways to conceive of ourselves and reconfigure the way we see the world around us (Silva 2021b; 2022; Harbin 2016; Jaggar 1989). The concept of moral injury, a source of relief for Chris Aaron and many other veterans, is but one such example.

The primary aim of this paper has been to criticise the ontology presented in theories of emotions that rely on a teleological framework. But this critique of traditional emotion theory extends beyond questions of ontology and categorisations. It is also a disagreement about how we should theorise human nature. Traditional emotion theory is built on moments where we know our feelings—we have found the right categories, words, or heuristics to express what we feel. But human emotions, as we all know, are messy. To ignore this fact, and to fail to account for emotional disorientation as a significant part of our emotional life, is theoretically untenable.

Even cases like Aaron’s should not be considered a deviation from the norm. Many veterans find themselves in a similar situation as Aaron. As anthropologist Tine Molendijk found in semi-structured interviews of Dutch veterans who also experienced moral injury:

Some veterans explicitly expressed uncertainty or confusion about the significance of their experiences. These veterans said that they “cannot work it out” and that they “cannot resolve it.” Others expressed uncertainty or confusion more implicitly (perhaps unconsciously), by uttering ambivalent or even conflicting interpretations of their experiences. (Molendijk 2018: 5–6)

Molendijk emphasizes that the veterans’ confusion should not be “readily (or only) be conceived of as a disorder, but rather (or also) as an as an ethical struggle” as a result of crushed moral certainties (Molendijk 2018: 7).<sup>19</sup>

The disorientation of veterans is not just normal and widespread,<sup>20</sup> it reflects well on them as moral agents (Kurth 2018a). In cases where veterans either perpetrated or witnessed others commit actions that violated their moral integrity, it would be chilling if they *were* able to uphold a stable self and not enter a state of disorientation. Sometimes we should not be able to sleep at night, and it is ethically prudent to be riddled with anxiety and uncertainty (Kurth 2018b: chaps. 4–6). A full discussion of the moral value of disorientation must

<sup>19</sup> There is no doubt that Aaron and many other veterans in similar situations often need intense medical and therapeutic help, but this does not exclude the possibility that their struggles also entail an ethical component.

<sup>20</sup> The literature covering moral injury among military veterans is vast and in rapid development. See Litz 2023: 20 for a recent literature review.

be left to another occasion. But the mere capacity to enter a state of disorientation—to be in doubt and second-guess our own assumptions—must be considered a core feature of human nature, not an anomaly.<sup>21</sup>

To be sincere, as Goldie writes, we must take disorientation seriously and refuse the determinate alternative (Goldie 2012: 147).<sup>22</sup> Goldie's point here is twofold. On an individual level, this requires us to embrace and take responsibility for the eventual "decisions" we make about our affective lives. But, from a theoretical perspective, the point is that there is no objective narrative or explanation that corresponds completely to our emotions. When teleological theories posit that emotions be captured and defined in such determinate terms, they give a mistaken account of our emotional life.

The problem is not just that teleological theories argue for determinate labels and distinct emotion categories, but also the implicit suggestion that we can predict how human beings will act based on which (distinct) affective states they are in. The core problem in teleological theories of emotions is the implicit assumption that it is possible to explain the behaviour of human beings in finite, definite terms. But, as Hannah Arendt pointed in *The Human Condition*, it is simply not possible to define human nature as we define other entities surrounding us. To attempt such an endeavour is like trying to jump over our own shadow (Arendt 1998: 10).

From Arendt's perspective, human beings can never know themselves fully. She developed this anti-essentialist and anti-teleological thesis of human nature as a criticism of the behaviourism of her time. She draws on Saint Augustine, who writes his confessions to try to understand his sinful youth before conversion to Christianity. "A question have I become to myself," he ponders, but Augustine does not regard this lack of complete self-comprehension as a problem (Arendt 1998: 10). It is rather something to marvel at.<sup>23</sup>

For Arendt, too, the mystery of self-knowledge is something equally terrifying and miraculous. Her entire political philosophy builds on the idea that human beings are only able to act freely because of this "startling unexpectedness," which is "inherent in all new beginnings and in all origins" (Arendt 1998: 178). Freedom is not just choosing between a certain number of alternatives; freedom is the ability to present a new perspective that is unexpected and unpredictable. Without this capacity, we would not be able to challenge the prevailing status quo. And veterans like Aaron would not be able to come up with new perspectives on why they feel distressed.

To a significant extent, we might say that agents themselves are not fully conscious of "who" they are. In fact, Arendt argues, "it is more likely that the 'who', which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself" (Arendt 1998: 179). This lack of transparency within a context of self-interpretation becomes especially evident when we consider cases of physiological stress such as that experienced by Aaron.<sup>24</sup> It was not until Aaron entered a community of fellow veterans with similar experiences that he was able to articulate and arrive at a clearer understanding of what he felt. From Arendt's perspective, this is because agents only come to know who they are through their interactions with others.<sup>25</sup> Their understanding of themselves is moulded by their surroundings and the hermeneutic equipment that is

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21 For discussions on the moral and political value of discomfort, see for example Harbin 2016; Kurth 2018b.

22 Here Goldie is quoting Stuart Hampshire (1972: 243).

23 Augustine writes: "Nor do I myself comprehend all that I am. Therefore is the mind too strait to contain itself. And where should that be, which it containeth not of itself? Is it without it, and not within? How then doth it not comprehend itself? A wonderful admiration surprises me, amazement seizes me upon this" (St. Augustine n.d.: bk. X chap. VIII).

24 See also Goldie's discussion of this (2012: 136) in which he draws on Crispin Wright (1998: 16).

25 For a recent experimental exploration of a similar thesis, see Bolis and Schilbach 2020.

made available for their use.<sup>26</sup> When we participate in conversation with others, we are asked to give reasons for our actions, and to stand accountable for our conduct (Arendt 1998: 182). It is in such moments, where we explain ourselves, that we can begin to name our feelings and try to reconstruct what they meant. But the way we construe our feelings is no finite process, through which we eventually discover the correct, determinate label, to assign to them. Our emotional life does not have a pre-defined telos. How we end up construing our emotions may even surprise ourselves. It is this indeterminate feature of human nature that makes moral transformation possible. Disorientation is not just a normal feature of human emotional life; it is also a constituent part of moral agency.

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<sup>26</sup> Arendt calls this *plurality*. It is the already existing web of relationships and systems for organisation and interpretation that we are thrown into (Arendt 1998: 184). For contemporary theoretical approaches that advocate the influence of the environment on our epistemic resources, see Haslanger 2020; McGeer 2007a; 2007b; Zawidzki 2013; Munch-Jurisic 2022: chap. 4.



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