

Creeped Out

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1. Introduction

You're quietly reading a book when you sense a bit of movement above your head. Looking up, you notice a large spider on a piece of silk halfway down to your shoulder. You're thoroughly creeped out.

Examples of creepiness come in a wide variety. Suppose that you are walking back to your home late at night when you sense human movement behind you in the dark, but cannot tell how far away it is. Or imagine that you discover a clown doll at the back of your refrigerator, staring aggressively at you. Or you observe a stranger hovering suspiciously over a woman's drink in a bar. We are aiming for an account of creepiness that can do justice to the full variety of creepy phenomena.

The emotional response elicited by creepiness is so little discussed in ordinary life or in academic discussions that it lacks a standard name in English. We will use the expression "creeped out" to pick out having the relevant emotion in response to something creepy.¹ Encountering creepy things and being creeped out is a ubiquitous human experience, and it is part of our emotional lives from a very early age. Children can be creeped out by their own stuffed toys; women are often creeped out walking home alone at night; horror-movie lovers are creeped out by some of the films they seek out.

In this paper, we investigate the nature both of creepiness and of being creeped out. Though we see an intimate connection between things being creepy and being creeped out by them, we think that having the reaction of being creeped out does not always occur when we judge something

¹ This is perhaps not quite in accord with common use: to our ears, "creeped out" suggests a relatively extreme form of the emotion, and not the more mild versions one might get from seeing a creepy acquaintance in a generally unthreatening setting or seeing a medium-sized creepy spider on a distant wall. Even if that is not how we would normally talk, though, we will describe a person who has the characteristic reaction, even in these cases, as being creeped out.

creepy: sometimes people just form beliefs about what is creepy without "feeling" it. For example, you might acknowledge the creepiness of a snake without feeling particularly creeped out by it. We think this is similar to a wide range of other emotional reactions: you can recognize something as dangerous without feeling any fear or nervousness, or recognize something is wrong or shameful without feeling any outrage. We also discuss the value of being able to detect creepiness. Being creeped out is not only instrumentally useful for protecting oneself from creepy things; it can also serve as a bonding activity and an indirect form of social censure.

2. Creepy Preliminaries

We can begin our investigation of creepiness by way of failed analyses. Initial attempts may well produce analyses which count more things as creepy than really are, or fewer, or may even cross-cut our eventual target, counting some non-creepy things and leaving out some creepy ones. Dictionary definitions, for example, rarely get closer than the general area. "Having a creeping of the flesh, or chill shuddering feeling, caused by horror or repugnance, or tending to produce such sensations" can be cobbled together from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but we think this characterization, while perhaps useful for transmitting the general idea, misses the mark in a number of ways.

For one thing, we do not take every chill shuddering produced by horror or repugnance to be the right sort of thing to be the feeling of creepiness. Some are too powerful or direct for that. Someone being hacked to death right in front of you may well make you shudder in horror and feel chills of fear, but it is not thereby creepy. And we suspect that some things which might seem creepy, or are even reacted to as creepy, are not really: we do not want to say judgements of creepiness, or reactions-as-of-creepiness are infallible. If they are not, then some things that may have a tendency to produce such a judgment or reaction may themselves not be creepy.

Something's being creepy *is* importantly connected to our reactions, and indeed we will defend a view which incorporates an important link to our reactions below. Here we are only objecting to a simplistic account of what that link is.

Another account that strikes us as too narrow is that offered by Fischer and Frederick 2020. Some of their aims are different from ours: they are interested in part in characterizing what makes a person a creep, which goes beyond what we are aiming to do. But they also want to give an account of creepiness, at least as it applies to “agential activity”, and to account for a specific emotional reaction, which they call “the creeps”, directed at agents and their behavior. If “the creeps” is meant to be the reactive kind associated with creepiness, we think their account would be much too narrow: the reaction some have to baby spiders hatching seems to us the same general kind of reaction as the reaction to creepy human activity, but we do not think that the former must be the result of some sort of anthropomorphizing misfire. But perhaps it is better to understand their notion of “the creeps” as a narrower version of what we are after with our notion of being creeped out: roughly, cases of being creeped out by agents or their actions.

Even with that restriction, we think Fischer and Frederick offer an account that counts some actions as creepy which are not, while counting some as not creepy which we think are. Their account of creepy agential activity is that it is activity that is “insensitive to basic norms, reasons, or values”, in ways they spell out (p 199). This insensitivity might be general or domain specific, and it might be due to obliviousness or deliberately immoral behavior. We think this does not quite get creepy activity right in two ways.

One is that certain kinds of flouting of moral principles do not seem creepy, nor seem to call for the typical sorts of reactions to creepiness. Noticing that a dry-cleaning business has been cheating on its taxes, or finding an unauthorized road built through a nature reserve, might be unpleasant or infuriating but is unlikely to seem creepy: and that is even if we think that the taxation regime is appropriate, or we support the moral need for nature reserves. This lack of creepiness stays in place even if we imagine that the business owner is deliberately cheating with no concern for the consequences, or the road-builders were oblivious to the moral value of environmental protection. These seem like the wrong sorts of insensitivity to call for being creeped out.

We also think that some insensitivity to moral norms can be blatant enough that it is not creepy. An armed robber pointing a shotgun at customers in a bank is threatening, horrifying, and, let us assume, appropriately insensitive to the moral norms that one should not do that sort of thing. But the holdup would not thereby be creepy. Some large-scale cases of immoral violence do not seem to us creepy either, when they are blatant enough. We do not think Nazi Germany was morally justified in launching World War Two, and e.g. the second battle of El Alamein between Germany forces and British forces in North Africa was a moral tragedy that was Nazi Germany's fault (though maybe not in the top 1000 things for which we condemn the Nazis), but that does not make that battle creepy, even if we think (as we do) that the Nazi leadership of Germany was insensitive to moral requirements in a particularly gross way. Avoidable famines are usually morally awful, and often there are identifiable agents and organizations with the power to prevent them that are engaged in a great moral wrong in not doing so. But while we find famines horrifying, and we think those responsible have often been insensitive to their moral obligations, we rarely find them creepy. (No doubt some creepy actions happen during famines or because of them: but that is a different matter from whether the famine or the actions leading to the famine are creepy.)

There is also creepy agential behavior that we do not think exhibits insensitivity to moral norms, at least not in any obvious way. Consider a case where a friend of yours voluntarily undergoes repeated plastic surgery. After a while, it gradually dawns on you that after each operation she looks more like Marilyn Monroe, and is presumably undergoing the surgery so that she will eventually look as similar to Monroe as she can. There are no moral norms being flouted in this case we think, though there are presumably social and perhaps aesthetic ones. Nonetheless, the behavior does seem creepy, and would appropriately elicit a feeling of being creeped out.

3. Appropriate Emotional Responses to Creepiness

It is worth getting a handle on the standard response that creepiness calls for, whether or not it provides the ultimate material for understanding creepiness itself. What more can we say about being creeped out, other than that it is a response called for by creepy circumstances?

There are some things we should not say. To say the reaction is “called for” by encountering creepy things is not to say that it is practically required or morally required. I am not making some sort of practical mistake if I am desensitized to the creepiness of museum display, or if I am focused on some other aspect of the display so that I have other reactions. I might be consumed by curiosity about the circumstances in which the artifacts were produced, or admiration for the skill of the curator in arranging the display. As we mentioned above, we think being creeped out is different from just judging that something is creepy: we could be reliable judges of that without feeling the reaction ourselves, if e.g. we have seen enough other people be creeped out by a specimen, or if we know inductively what sorts of things are creepy.

We suspect it would be hard to get a *precise* bead on being creeped out merely through a philosophical discussion, as opposed to noticing what is in common in many of the examples, or feeling the reaction or a hypothecated version of it. It would not even be a disaster if it was one of those "if you have to ask, you're never going to know" experiences: that would not show it was ineffable or cast doubt on the reality of the reaction. It would just mean that we could come to know about it only in less intellectual ways. Still, we think there may be some useful things to say to partially characterize the notion, and we will attempt to say some of these things.

Being creeped out can be partially understood by comparing and contrasting it with similar reactive emotions. Being creeped out shares some phenomenological features with fear, especially in threatening situations. But the uncertainty and unpredictability of creepy things seem to us to add extra elements that distinguish the experience of being creeped out from being merely fearful. Creepiness often involves an aspect of potential and sometimes diffuse danger, rather than danger being immediate and straightforward. I might be afraid that the big boulder rolling in my direction is going to hit me, but I am not creeped out by it: the boulder presents certain danger rather than mere potential for it. On the other hand, if I am camping in a ravine below some giant boulders and I have just read on the news that a murderer is sneaking around the area loosening them, I am likely to be creeped out in addition to being fearful. The feeling of being creeped out can also be triggered when the person experiencing it is in no danger herself: books bound in human skin can be experienced as creepy even if they were produced centuries ago in another land. Fear, on the other hand, is often a recognition of first-person danger.

Empathetic fear is possible, of course: hearing of a loved one's cancer diagnosis, or seeing a child obliviously playing on the road while an unseeing truck bears down, can produce fear reactions even when the person feeling fear does not apprehend any personal danger. Still, there seems to be a matter of degree here, with being creeped out being appropriate in cases where fear would seem less apt. Reading a medical report about a rare tropical brain parasite might naturally elicit the reaction of being creeped out, but if it elicits fear in someone never likely to be exposed to the parasite, that might suggest hypochondria.

Being creeped out shares some features with disgust, including a feeling of revulsion in some cases. They are also structurally similar emotional reactions: like the relationship between being creeped out and creepy things, disgust is also best illuminated in tandem with examining which sorts of things and situations elicit disgust.

Even though the same phenomena might sometimes produced disgust and being creeped out in the same audience, or produce one reaction in some and the other in others, being creeped out is importantly different. Disgust seems even less connected with danger, even indirect or diffuse danger: Kay may be disgusted by the state of her teenager's bedroom without feeling that there is any danger present. On the other hand, some unpleasant and even unsanitary things may make disgust appropriate but, we think, not being creeped out. I might be disgusted by a fecal smear on a dinner plate, but without some further stage setting that does not seem particularly creepy.² Disgust can be elicited by phenomena that are neither ambiguous nor threatening.

This does not exhaust the differences between being creeped out, on the one hand, and the reaction of disgust, on the other. While we think there are clear cases of one but not the other, we are also open to discovering that some reactions are indeterminate between the two: and of course, as we said above, sometimes someone can have both reactions at once. (It would be understandable to find brain parasites both creepy and disgusting, for example.) Our suspicion is that the lines drawn by our concepts here are rough-and-ready rather than perfectly sharp.

² See also McAndrew and Koehnke (2016) and Fischer and Fredericks (2020) for discussions of the distinction between being creeped out and other emotions.

Let us then turn to a more positive characterization of creepiness, via a characterization of the canonical attitude to creepy things, i.e. being creeped out. It seems obvious that creepiness is at least partly response-dependent: things are not mind-independently creepy. But there are a few typical shared features of things that *tend* to induce the feeling of being creeped out: direct or indirect threat, some element of danger, and some element of unpredictability.

Return to the example of the spider halfway down to your head. What is creepy about it? Firstly, the spider poses some sort of threat: whether or not it is poisonous, the possibility that it could land on your head momentarily makes you uneasy with respect to your well-being. Such threats, we propose, can be direct or indirect, but they cannot be *too* direct and still count as creepy. Someone holding a gun to your head is threatening, but it is too direct to be creepy. Consider, by contrast, a figure moving in the dark outside your bedroom window. Partly, what is creepy about it is that you do not, presumably, know what the figure is or what sort of danger they might pose.

On the other hand, clearly non-dangerous things may not call for being creeped out, even if they are somewhat like dangerous ones. A child stalking you with a water gun in a game isn't creepy, like other stalking situations might be. And something that is creepy can cease to be creepy once the danger element is removed. For example, a creepy dark figure moving outside your bedroom window ceases to be creepy when it is revealed to be a well-known neighbor tending to her garden.

Third, creepiness involves an element of *unpredictability*. You are not sure when or if the spider will drop onto your head, or if the shadowy figure in the dark parking lot will come closer. If the mugger announces with a bullhorn that he is heading in your direction to mug you, you might still feel threatened, but the mugger is, arguably, no longer creepy. Or consider the dark figure moving outside your bedroom window. Partly, what is creepy about it is that you do not know what the figure is or what sort of danger they might pose.³ Once the unpredictability evaporates, so, too, does much of the creepiness, even while the threat may remain.

³ In an empirical study on the defining features of creepiness, Watt, Maitland, and Gallagher (2017) hold that the data suggest that judgments of creepiness center more on “ambiguity of threat” than physical peril.

Posing a threat, being dangerous, and being unpredictable do not jointly constitute necessary or sufficient conditions for creepiness. But they do, we propose, play a role in a large portion of intuitive cases of creepiness. They also jointly explain disparate sorts of cases of creepiness, including sexual creepiness (like the case of a sexual harasser who asks if you'd be free for dinner tonight at his place)⁴, slight-deviation-from-human-form creepiness (like the case of a not-entirely-human clown), and creepiness as ambiguous threat (as in the underdescribed threat depicted at the end of *The Blair Witch Project*.) And different aspects will play lighter or heavier roles depending on the case. Unpredictability might play a large role in children finding things creepy, since they do not necessarily know that a wind-animated tree won't come to life and hurt them. Being dangerous might play a bigger role in other cases, as when only an epidemiologist knows that the infected human remains are likely to expose everyone in the room to the virus.

Being creeped out does not need to be a result of direct sensory contact, like feeling the *whoosh* of an unknown figure behind you in the dark. Simply reading a creepy story or description can appropriately creep one out. Even imagining something creepy can cause one to feel creeped out. It is easy to sit alone in one's dark house at night and creep oneself out by imagining the slow unlocking of the front door from the outside.

Being creeped out need not be an emotion immediately produced by a stimulus: some feature of a situation can dawn on you as creepy well after you know it obtains. Having a friendly interaction with a subway ticket agent, only to later see her on the evening news as the long-time serial killer who has finally been caught, can creep you out long after the fact. Even casual reflection can result in this feeling. For example, realizing that the Smurf village contains dozens of males and only one woman can produce a creeped out reaction hours or years after seeing the cartoon. In fact, disturbing aspects of many children's stories can have this creeped-out-after-the-event feature.⁵

⁴ See Mann (2012) for a discussion of "creeper" sexual harassers, and their distinctive moral harms. Mann also distinguishes sexual creepiness from flirtation, which has an indirect character like creepiness. For a philosophical discussion of flirtation, see Jenkins (2006) and Nolan (2008). Nolan 2008 contains several examples of failed flirtation that we would find creepy.

⁵ For more examples, see <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/scary-childrens-stories>.

It is also illuminating to look at inappropriate reactions to creepy things. A young child might be delighted by the sight of a formerly inert clown that suddenly comes to life and says “I want to kill you all,” not picking up on the possible threat. Or someone might find a masked figure with a knife lurking around in the dark absolutely hilarious. While these are emotional reactions to creepy things, they seem to not be reactions to the creepy aspects of those things, and not to be experiences of the environment as creepy. More subtle distinctions may include distinguishing the appropriate reaction from disgust or horror, though here we might expect some overlap, since a single reaction can contain elements of a number of different standard reactions.⁶ We will not stop to further chart out the boundaries here, but we trust that readers will be able to do a lot of this charting on their own, at least if they are already familiar with creepiness and being creeped out.

4. Creepiness Itself: A Preliminary Analysis

We are now in a position to state, and preliminarily defend, the kind of account of creepiness we think has the best chance of success. For something to be creepy is for it to be disposed to elicit a reaction of being creeped out from appropriate observers in suitable circumstances. So far, we have been focusing on what the relevant reaction of being “creeped out” is. But to be viable, the account has to have reasonable things to say about eliciting that reaction, who appropriate observers are, and what the suitable circumstances are. All of these tasks are ones where response dependent accounts of anything typically struggle. Response dependent accounts of moral properties (Johnston 1989; Plakias 2018), aesthetic properties (Wiggins 1998; D’Arms and Jacobson 2000; King 2023) and color (Johnston 1989, De Sa 2013) are among the most prominent.

We should distinguish two kinds of trouble that response dependent theories get into when theorizing about appropriate observers and suitable circumstances. One sort of trouble challenges *any* filling in of these parameters in principle: maybe some things are creepy only because they are in non-standard circumstances or being experienced by inappropriate observers, for example.

⁶ See also Livingstone Smith (2021, pp. 244-245) for the suggestion that creepiness and horror reside on a single spectrum of uncanniness.

The other sort of challenge, which we think is much more widespread in the literature on response dependent accounts, concerns particular proposals about which states of observers and which circumstances are appropriate. Some of those challenges may be impossible to answer if we try to specify what observers or circumstances must be like in a non-circular fashion. There may not be any handy expressions of English that exactly match the contours of the standard circumstances in which an observer appropriately reacts to something creepy by being creeped out, except perhaps by using the vocabulary of creepiness or being creeped out.

Perhaps the situation is like the one Wiggins 1998 suggests is the case with things being funny, on the one hand, and having a good sense of humor, on the other. People laugh at unfunny things, and hilarious states of the world may not evoke any amusement. Even so, we might think humor is response-dependent and the responses of those with good senses of humor are the ones that matter for sorting the truly funny from the unfunny things that lead some to laugh. There might be no better way to investigate both sides of this symbiosis than to use our starting grip on the funny and appropriate reactions to it, then use it in triangulating which senses of humor are better, and which phenomena are engaging those senses of humor in the right way. One day completed humor science might be able to tell us who has good senses of humor and which things are funny, in a response-dependent way, without anyone right now being able to articulate which reactions exactly count, and which situations exactly would appropriately bring forth amusement from the right crowd.

Likewise with creepiness and being appropriately creeped out. We think the same strategy of mutual illumination is to be used for creepiness and being creeped out. We start with our initial access to the emotional reaction, on the one hand, and the imperfectly understood phenomena, on the other. We can then use the reaction to guide us, on the one hand, and use our understanding of the phenomena to sharpen our understanding of which reactions are of the appropriate sort, and which circumstances are suitable. The philosophical and psychological literature can be viewed as already taking the first steps down this path: our objections to Fischer and Fredericks 2020, above, can be seen as attempts at some of this refinement, for example. None of us are at the end of that long road, so while this paper defends a response dependent account of creepiness, it does so by arguing that the eventual correct account will be a response-dependent

one, rather than by exhibiting a specific response dependent account and defending that specific proposal.

One thing to notice about the style of account we favor, as with accounts of the funny or indeed of moral value in the Wigginsian tradition, is that there is no presumption that we will be able to state the final account in conceptually reductionist terms. That is, in the case of creepiness and being creeped out, even the final account might not be fully understandable by someone without an antecedent grip on creepiness and being creeped out. In case this seems like special pleading on our behalf, let us return to the case of humor. Even an ideal Wigginsian account of what is funny, on the one side, and what a good sense of humor is, on the other, may not enable someone with no antecedent grip of either the phenomenon or the reaction to work out the boundary between the funny and the non-funny. They will presumably be able to guess that scenarios very like funny ones are themselves funny, and predict to some degree what will amuse someone with the right sensibilities, in a broad range of circumstances, but as we know sometimes something that we guess would be funny falls flat, or something in the midst of a lot of unfunny happenings can be hilarious. Comedy-writing will not be an easy job even for someone who reads the ideal Wiggins-style analysis. (Or so we guess. We don't want to underestimate future humor scientists, and there's some possibility an automated humor-generating machine following a simple algorithm will be right every time. Nothing in the Wiggins approach guarantees that this cannot happen.)

The analogy with humor brings out one more aspect of this approach to creepiness we think is important. In the case of color, we sometimes think there is one right answer about what shade an object is, or at least what shade it presents as in given lighting etc. But in the case of humor, there seems to be permissible variation in what amuses even among those with good senses of humor.⁷ We think this is even more so with being creeped out. It's okay to not feel that reaction even when a scenario triggers it in many people, and it is okay to be more sensitive than most to being creeped out. And not just morally or prudentially okay: we do not seem to be aiming for

⁷ Partridge and Jordan 2018 rightly stress this variation in the case of humor (pp. 1305-1307). We see their "Fitting Attitude" account of the funny, and other Fitting Attitude accounts as more normative cousins to the response dependent account we favor, though both trace some of their ancestry back to Wiggins's work. Arguing for one versus the other would take us too far afield, but we see *reasons* for reactions as being developmentally and conceptually downstream of the reactions themselves, as well as the phenomena they are reactions to. So we would prefer to leave reasons, and reactions to reasons, out of the account if we can.

perfect convergence in our reactions or even particularly our ordinary judgements about what is creepy. As far as we can tell, there is more than one sensibility with respect to being creeped out that is uncriticizable. This gives us some choice points about creepiness itself. Is something creepy if it is appropriately associated with all ideal sensibilities? At least one of them? Most of them? If forced to choose we would guess that something is creepy if and only if, generically, it is disposed to produce the right sort of reaction in the right sort of situations among people with the right sensibilities, though we are glad that there is not much immediate theoretical pressure to choose between that and rival options.

Even if all these typical problems with specifying appropriate responses are surmounted, there is one kind of case which may give us particular trouble. On the face of it, some abstract objects are creepy, and we appropriately get creeped out reactions when contemplating them. Some theories are creepy. (We find various pseudo-scientific racist theories creepy; and theories according to which women should be coerced into sexual services for men, among others). Some propositions and rumors are creepy. If e.g. musical works are abstract objects, then some of those abstract objects are creepy, since some music is creepy. Some mathematical objects are creepy, because of their links to creepy events or because they encode computer processes that do creepy things when run. Some mere possibilities and merely possible objects are creepy, as are some merely hypothetical scenarios, possible or not.

The challenge is that, plausibly, none of these abstract entities do any causal work, and so they do not themselves elicit any responses in us. Insofar as "responses" are causally downstream of the entities being responded to, none of these things can be creepy because of responses to them. There are several ways of responding to this difficulty. One could adopt a revised metaphysics, where these things, or some of them, cause emotional responses in us after all. Or one could deny that, strictly speaking, any of these things are creepy: perhaps they are just confused with things that are creepy ("creepy" theories with creepy theorists, for example, or musical pieces with musical performances).

We think less extreme revisions can handle these cases. One option would be to loosen what is understood by a "response". Even if theories are abstract entities, for example, we talk about people having strong reactions to them (e.g. reactions in the physics community to the theory of

relativity in the early twentieth century). Maybe what caused the reactions were inscriptions that expressed the theory, or some mix of speech and diagrams at a conference, but we appear to understand a wider sense of "response" according to which people can respond to abstract objects. Perhaps this wider sense is the one to use. The other would be to appeal to focal and non-focal meanings. Perhaps health is primarily a property of organisms. But that does not mean that there cannot be healthy diets, or a healthy exercise regime, or a health department. Likewise, even if the focal meaning of "creepy", or the core property identified by "creepiness", involves causing responses, other things associated with that property, or things with that property, might appropriately be labeled "creepy" in a non-focal way. Perhaps the abstract objects saliently associated with focal-creepy things count as creepy in a non-focal way.

There are two salient alternatives to our approach. We start from the response of being creeped out, and given an account of creepiness in terms of it. (Or rather, we recommend refining our account of both phenomena in a Wiggins-style bootstrapping way, beginning with the reaction and when it is appropriate.) Another line of approach is to start with the property of creepiness and give an account of the reaction to it, and its appropriateness. The second alternative approach would be a no-priority view, according to which neither of the two linked phenomena is prior in the order of analysis or explanation.

A "creepiness first" approach might seem phenomenologically natural. We often encounter creepy things or activities first, and reflect on our reactions afterwards. Nevertheless, we have two objections to a "creepiness first" approach. The first is that the phenomena are not obviously unified by anything beyond their connections to our creeped out reaction. In the previous section we identified various properties that often go along with being creepy, but it is hard to come up with informative exceptionless generalizations about creepy things, let alone find an independent way into locating necessary and sufficient conditions. The second objection is that a central part of our epistemological access to creepiness is via our own and others reactions of being creeped out. Starting by noticing what sorts of things prompt the reaction, and using our information about when the reaction is prompted and when it is not, seems like a more natural way to begin.

Of course, a central part of the epistemology of most of the world around us involves our reactions: it would be hard to find out about squirrels without appeal to information gained via

sensation, but it does not follow that an account of squirrels must be in terms of things looking or sounding like squirrels. Rather, creepiness is more like color. While there is a lot of fascinating color science to be done, plausibly our grip on color is primarily based in how things look to us (or to those of us with good color vision, at least). Trying to theorize creepiness prior to giving an account of being creeped out seems to us like trying to come up with a theory of color independently of any information about how things look.

Approaches which do not take either creepiness or being creeped out to be prior in the order of analysis can come in at least two varieties. One approach would be to develop independent accounts of both creepiness and being creeped out, and only then specify how they are related. This seems to us to have two sets of drawbacks. The first is that it suffers from the problems that the "creepiness first" account faces, of characterizing and defending creepiness without relying on the reaction of being creeped out. The second is that it just looks difficult and unmotivated to rely *neither* on an understanding of creepiness in accounting for being creeped out *nor* an understanding of being creeped out in accounting for creepiness. It gives up one of the most initially promising ways into understanding creepiness *and* one of the most initially promising ways of understanding being creeped out.

A more plausible "no priority" approach would hold that we should not try to understand the two entirely independently of each other, but rather that we should attempt to come up with an account of them in tandem, using our information about both without taking either to be prior. Our attitude to this version of a no priority view is more complex. We are willing to concede, for the sake of this paper at least, that being creeped out and creepiness itself may not stand in any relation of metaphysical priority to each other: they appear to be distinct existences, and the things that ontologically underpin the reaction, on the one hand, and the things that ontologically underpin creepy phenomena and maybe their creepiness itself might be another. We are not particularly opposed to views that make creepiness derivative of facts about the reaction either: we do not intend to speak to that issue either way.

The kind of priority we suggest for the reaction of being creeped out is conceptual, or at least explanatory, rather than metaphysical. We are presenting a view according to which our understanding of creepiness, and our grip on creepiness in the world, is in terms of the reaction

of being creeped out. (There would be *conceptual* priority of being creeped out over creepiness if our concept of creepiness was to be unpacked in terms of being creeped out but not vice versa: we do not want to get into debates about the nature of concepts and conceptual analysis either, though we would see someone who did maintain the conceptual priority of being creeped out over creepiness as an ally.)

This kind of priority of understanding and explanation is compatible with the direction of metaphysical dependence not going in the same direction. For example, arguably our understanding of electrons is via our understanding of macroscopic electrically charged objects, but plausibly electrons themselves do not metaphysically depend on ordinary macroscopic objects: if anything, the metaphysical dependence runs in the opposite direction, from macroscopic objects to micro-objects like electrons. While we are happy to describe the response dependent view we offer as prioritizing being creeped out over creepiness in the order of explanation, it is not the clearest case of this sort of priority. After all, the Wigginsian back-and-forth needed to come up with an eventual understanding and explanation of the pair requires attention to both sides, and if someone wished to classify our suggestion as a no-priority view, we may only be having a dispute about labels rather than substance. So *some* no-priority views may be ones that we would not end up disagreeing with: "priority" is a slippery thing to argue about. At any rate, we would encourage those tempted by no-priority views to pay attention to the central role being creeped out has in not just identifying specific cases of creepiness but in giving us a starting point for answering more theoretical questions about the creepy and our responses to it.

In charting these options, we do not want to be dogmatic about preferring our own. When creepiness-first or no-priority views are developed, they should be examined in their own right. Our intention is not to dismiss alternative approaches, but rather to be explicit about the existence of a theoretical choice-point here, and to offer some preliminary reasons for trying to develop a theory along the lines we favor.

5. The Value of Detecting Creepiness

If our above discussion of what creepiness is on the right track, then it would seem that the primary value of being able to detect creepiness is to avoid dangerous or disgusting things. (It may be that in turn disgusting things are often a threat to hygiene or health or safety.) The fact that being creeped out is a relatively visceral reaction that appears to require little cultural scaffolding suggests that it is a response with origins, at least in part, deep in our evolutionary history: and we might predict that there would be a suite of relatively old emotional responses with the function of avoiding threats in our environment, including by drawing attention to those threats.

Connected to this individual-level function, being creeped out serves a basic social role as well.⁸ It is not just in my interest to keep track of spiders or scavengers or off-putting human behavior occurring near me, but it is in the interests of my group. We can often tell when people we know are creeped out (think of the cries of children when something creepy appears suddenly), and that gives us a shared early warning system: discovering other people are creeped out can help us notice and track creepy things in our environment, even when we discover their presence or their creepy aspect through paying attention to other people.⁹

Being creeped out is a feeling or reaction that is valuable for some other reasons as well. A shared sense of what is creepy can make for social bonding, either in the face of a joint threat or annoyance, or just to feel fellow feelings in shared reactions. This building of connections with others and shared solidarity might now be more important to most of us than the function of alerting us to threats: taking children to the zoo to see some creepy animals is not likely to be so that they can be warned about danger, but is rather a fun shared activity. So is going to a haunted house or a scary movie with a group of friends. It can also play a useful role in social coordination: when we evince being creeped out at another's behavior, this can be a signal to those who notice that we dislike or disapprove of that kind of behavior. If it gets back to the person engaging in the behavior, it may regulate their actions as well. Few people enjoy being thought

⁸ For some similar points about disgust, see Plakias (2018, p. 5462). Plakias suggests that expressions of disgust are forms of social rejection, and that such expressions can deter further disgusting behavior.

⁹ A number of papers about creepy behavior stress this role of detecting creepiness in interpersonal settings: see Mann 2012 and Fischer and Fredericks 2020.

of as a creep.¹⁰ A sexual harasser, for example, might not mind being thought of as a scoundrel, but would not want to be considered creepy.

Our sensitivity to creepiness can also be exploited for aesthetic ends. This can occur across a wide range of cultural productions, from a zombie Halloween costume to disturbing artwork in a gallery. (Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son*, for example, can be experienced as horrifying or sublime, but it can also be legitimately experienced as creepy.) The exact reaction sought can vary as well, from children or adults who enjoy an "Ewwwww!" reaction, to viewers realizing there is something slightly off in a portrait, or something subtly unsettling in a camera angle or film score.

6. Conclusion

Being able to see parts of the world as creepy, and being able to respond to creepiness by being creeped out, plays an interesting and important role in our emotional lives. It can be useful as a rough-and-ready danger signal, a device for social co-ordination about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and a source of aesthetic interest and pleasure. Creepiness characterizes a wide range of situations and objects, not just those that suggest danger or a violation of social norms. This wide range can be unified in a response-dependent way, by reference to the characteristic response of being creeped out, though since the connection between the relevant reaction and creepy things is not straightforward, we have suggested that spelling out the exact connection calls for a process of bootstrapped inquiry, mutually illuminating both being creeped out and creepiness itself. Along the way many interesting questions about creepiness will arise, including the value of being creeped out and the role the creepy plays in our psychological and interpersonal lives.

Creepiness is intrinsically interesting, but we also think it serves as an interesting case study for thinking about emotional reactions and their objects more generally. Being creeped out is to be distinguished from a range of other reactions, including being disgusted or horrified, but we

¹⁰ Fischer and Fredericks (2020: p. 199, 204) also discuss this point.

suspect similar analyses will serve to illuminate the nature of the disgusting and the horrific. We hope similar treatments will serve for more positive interactions with the world around us, though all such explorations must be left for another occasion.¹¹

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