

## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Rationality and Irrationality of Feelings about Risk**

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Modern theories in cognitive psychology and neuroscience indicate that there are two fundamental ways in which human beings comprehend risk. The “analytic system” uses algorithms and normative rules, such as the probability calculus, formal logic, and risk assessment. It is relatively slow, effortful, and requires conscious control. The “experiential system” is intuitive, fast, mostly automatic, and not very accessible to conscious awareness. The experiential system enabled human beings to survive during their long period of evolution and remains today the most natural and most common way to respond to risk. It relies on images and associations, linked by experience to emotion and affect (a feeling that something is good or bad). This system represents risk as a feeling that tells us whether it’s safe to walk down this dark street or drink this strange-smelling water. Research shows that such feelings are an important guide to behavior and, like visual perceptions, they are typically fast, accurate, and rational. Yet, also like perceptions, our feelings systematically fail us in certain important situations. I shall illustrate these failures in the domain of genocide and argue for the need to employ reason and deliberate thought to create laws and institutions that compel us to take genocide seriously even when, as is mostly the case, we feel apathetic towards its occurrence.

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