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The Delights of Disgust

By *Justin E.H. Smith*



Matt Roth for The Chronicle Review

Of no small interest to Darwin and, after him, to Freud and all those working in his wide cultural shadow, disgust as a topic of theoretical inquiry would go into retreat for much of the latter part of the 20th century. Sartre's *Nausea*, published in 1938, seems to have identified and described what would come to be the defining passion of the 1950s and 60s, and the difference between it and disgust might serve as a good measure of how much the world has changed since then. Nausea, like melancholy or anomie, is generalized, diffuse, often without an object; disgust, by contrast, is generally set off by very specific triggers: a

misplaced hair, for example, or an undercooked steak. It is a passion better suited to narrow research programs than to existential pondering.

It is also the subject of numerous recent works in widely different areas of philosophy, including moral and legal philosophy, aesthetics, and the new iteration of what is being called "experimental philosophy." Perhaps because disgust is a focused passion, the most fruitful recent work on it has come from the sort of research that is of interest to the new experimental philosophers. Scholarly attention to disgust from the point of view of aesthetics trails behind, yet is not without interest. The recent treatment of disgust as a problem of moral and legal philosophy, finally, has been held back by a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the passion under discussion, and of the role it plays in the human experience of the social and natural worlds.

Take, for example, Martha Nussbaum's book *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (Oxford University Press, 2010), which appears to have been written for a high-school civics course. Implicit already in its title is the idea that disgust is inhuman, or perhaps pre-human, that it is a stage to advance out of on the way to humanity. For Nussbaum it's all very simple: Disgust is immature, and well-adjusted adults should grow out of it.

As an effort to shape law and public policy in the United States, Nussbaum's approach makes sense. But it's a sad fact of public debate in America that words intended to influence public debate must sound like they are intended for adolescents. *From Disgust to Humanity* is in large part a riposte to the argument made by Leon R. Kass, head of President George W. Bush's President's Council on Bioethics, that disgust (for example, at the thought of anal sex) has its own inherent "wisdom," which may serve as a "natural" basis on which to develop a sexual ethics. Nussbaum argues against Kass, but the two are united by a sort of

anthropological obtuseness. He is wrong to suppose that what disgusts us in sexual matters can simply be read off of nature, and that nature writes in the same idiom in all times and places. She, in turn, is wrong to suppose that just because disgust is culturally variable and thus to some extent arbitrary, and because it can result in oppressive social relations, it is therefore somehow inhuman.

I confess I am disgusted by a great many things about people (and about myself, but let's put that aside). I do not believe it is particularly urgent for me to overcome my disgust, even if I recognize that this emotion must remain entirely separate from my thinking about which laws would be most just. I am disgusted by other people's dandruff, facial moles, food stuck in their beards, yet I do not accept that in feeling this way I am judging those people to be subhuman. I take it rather that humanity, while endearing, is also capable of appearing disgusting.

In fact, one great problem with Kass's approach, which Nussbaum does nothing to refute, is that disgust and its various opposites—relish, delectation, delight—seem ever so delicately close to each other, and always ready to slide unawares over to the other side. This is not some abstruse psychoanalytic paradox, but a simple observation of an obvious condition of human bodily experience. The same things that excite our desire most—the naked bodies of other humans, the bright red shell of a boiled lobster, a cigarette glowing in an ashtray—are the things that always, simultaneously, threaten to excite our revulsion. Kass should be suspicious of his "wisdom" regarding the various uses of the anus, lest he find his revulsion crossing over all too suddenly into a very different sort of passion.

Cicero observed that the greatest pleasures are only narrowly separated from disgust. Nussbaum no doubt knows that, even if she prefers in the present work to focus on the Roman orator's more elevated treatment of the concept of *humanitas*, "a

responsiveness to others that prominently included the ability to imagine their experiences." Could it be, though, that Cicero did not consider this responsiveness to the humanity of others as incompatible with being grossed out by them? Such a presumption of compatibility may, in fact, be truer to the spirit of *humanitas* than any version that results from an effort to isolate this responsiveness in its pure, other-embracing form.

That last point has generally been best understood in the arts; novelists and poets are often much better than theorists at appreciating the complicated ways in which disgust and desire work together, even conspire together, and at appreciating the ways in which this conspiracy, far from being an impediment to our humanity, is constitutive of it.



Matt Roth for The Chronicle Review

Rabelais, to cite one extreme example, pounds away with instance after instance of the disgusting ways human beings appear: in gluttony, in bestiality, in massaging one's groin with the downy head of a duck. The giant Gargantua is disgusting, and hilarious: a pair of closely related, perhaps inseparable adjectives. It is hard to imagine how one could operate freely in the humorous mode without courting disgust. Risibility, as the medieval philosophers understood, is a trait found wherever there is humanity. Rabelais courts disgust, but the reader never loses sight of the fact that it is humanity's marvelous, over-the-top disgustingness that is under consideration. In real life, too, the food in the beard would not

disgust me if it were on a plate, and that is because the beard is on a human, and it is precisely his humanity I am recognizing when I am disgusted by him.

Nor would I reproach a culture, should one be discovered, that considers food in the beard a fitting tribute to a host after a fine meal. There are a number of historical examples of culinary practices that today seem no less repulsive. For example, French explorers among the Huron in the 17th century found it difficult to enjoy one of the local delicacies: a sort of cornbread, whose batter, before baking, was mixed with saliva in the mouths of the tribe's elder women.

Is that intrinsically disgusting? Well, it might help to recall that, biologically speaking, all cooking is a form of extrasomatic predigestion, beginning a process of breaking down raw food through dicing, boiling, etc., that is subsequently continued by our digestive system. That might explain why communal eating is potentially a source of great disgust. Like sex, it is a sharing of the stuff of life, and who you do it with determines to no small degree who you are. That is also why communal eating is so crucial for the establishment of social bonds, and thus why the French explorers in the end forced themselves to swallow the cornbread.

There is nothing categorically more disgusting about the Huron recipe than there is about the sort of predigestion that precedes communal eating in all cultures, yet this does not mean the French were simply being fickle when they felt disgust. Neither Kass nor Nussbaum, however, if they had been talking about cooking rather than sex, would have had the conceptual resources to come to that simple, and obvious, conclusion.

But let's get back to sex. I cannot see any good reason to think of the way, say, oral sex, triggers or fails to trigger disgust any differently than how we think of the cornbread. We've known since Kinsey that in our own culture, openness to sexual acts has

much to do with social class: the higher you are, the more "game"—as Dan Savage puts it—you are. When we consider the question cross-culturally, even more so than across social classes, we must take into consideration the culture's total symbolic system into which an instance of cunnilingus or fellatio would be absorbed. What is the culture's symbolism surrounding semen, for example? Is it charged with a force that would make it dangerous to swallow?

Leontius in *Plato's Republic*, confessed that, while he himself did not wish to gawk at the rotting corpses of prisoners outside the city walls, his eyes very much did.

Nussbaum discusses at some length the case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, in which Michael Hardwick, a gay man, was found guilty of "sodomy" under Georgia law for performing mutual oral sex with a male partner. An important part of Nussbaum's argument against the ruling is that what Hardwick "was doing in his bedroom was exactly like what millions of heterosexuals, married and unmarried, were doing legally all over America." But is it fair to say that the two sorts of acts are exactly alike? As Maurice Godelier and others have noted, there is at least one culture, the Baruya of Papua New Guinea, in which fellatio has traditionally been ritualized among young men, since semen holds the essence of the social group and needs to be transmitted between males. In such a context, heterosexual and homosexual fellatio are plainly not at all alike.

Granted, Nussbaum compellingly argues that the two cases are alike when it comes to constitutional law, but that simply serves to illustrate that, to the extent a scholar is interested in interpreting the U.S. Constitution, she is not really in a position to give us a rich philosophical treatment of disgust. While you might dismiss

examples from the highlands of New Guinea as bits of curious exoticism, it remains the case that Nussbaum purports to be giving us, in addition to an argument about constitutional law, a philosophical account of the nature of disgust and its connection to morality.

That disgust relies on moral obtuseness is a philosophical claim, and not one about the proper interpretation of the Constitution. In order to properly ground this sort of claim, an inquiry must take into account the richness and variety of human social reality, rather than taking the single society that is regulated by constitutional law as the default setting of that reality. And it is not just a desire for knowledge for its own sake that makes such an account useful. It is also practically necessary, in order to expose the deeper mechanisms at work in the formation of sexual prohibitions, to see the degree to which Georgia bigots constitute a "tribe" of their own, and so to be able to respond adequately to the folk beliefs that underlie the prejudicial legislation Nussbaum rightly abhors.

Her argument, while relying on the premise that it is "imagination" that is most needed, itself turns out to be devoid of imagination, anthropologically blind, and lacking in any sympathy for the variety of ways humans impose meaning and structure on their lives. That comes out clearly in her discussion of psychological research showing that many of us (certainly myself and everyone I know) find it disagreeable to drink water from bedpans, even if we are certain that they have never been used for their primary purpose. If something is not unhygienic, she thinks, then there is simply no good reason not to swallow it. Quit being so fussy, Nussbaum means to say. This is the work of a moralist and a pamphleteer, not the humanist and scholar we otherwise know her to be.

In *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (Oxford, 2011), Carolyn Korsmeyer is more interested in understanding

disgust than in overcoming it. She sets out in the belief that our most intense desires are shadowed by disgust, and thus that this emotion cannot be entirely negative. "No matter how one labels the phenomenon," she writes, "the presence of allure packaged with aversion calls for explanation." Perhaps the difference between Nussbaum's and Korsmeyer's approaches can be explained by the fact that Nussbaum is doing legal philosophy, and Korsmeyer aesthetics. It is difficult not to conclude that the aesthetic approach is more fruitful and interesting.

Korsmeyer, a professor of philosophy at the University at Buffalo, traces her approach to the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai, who in 1929 published an essay "*Der Ekel*" ("Disgust") that she identifies, in the introduction to her translation (with Barry Smith) of this work, as "the basic prerequisite for any investigation of disgust." Kolnai saw disgust as inherently paradoxical, to the extent that it is "a genuinely passive defensive reaction of the subject, ... and yet, once aroused, it seeks out its object, as hatred does, in its entire significance, instead of unfolding according to the person's own condition." This seems right. I can personally attest that when I was a lad, and some crude coeval invited his friends to "smell my finger," we recalcitrated and squirmed, but we always caved in the end.

Korsmeyer gives good reason to suppose that it is in the aesthetic vein that one will learn the most from an investigation of disgust. In part that is because art that evokes disgust generally does not lead to an extreme physiological reaction, nor to violence and destruction (though there are many counterexamples: "Piss Christ," the Buddhas of Bamiyan), but rather only to a sort of contemplative, modulated disgust. Art disgusts us enough to provoke reflection, but seldom vomiting. Moreover, this variety of disgust is one we seek out, one we happily pay to enter the museum to experience, and thus we cannot fail to recognize that it is something that gives us some sort of pleasure.

Korsmeyer cites Hieronymus Bosch and Francis Bacon as artists who give us the disgust we crave in a dose we can handle, and surely everyone will have favorite examples. Art gives us what we can think of only as disgusting beauties. The possibility of such things in the controlled environment of the canvas can serve as a guide to the more difficult, and more anxiety-inducing, case of disgust at, say, our own or other people's sexual habits, or the case of Leontius in *Plato's Republic*, who confessed that, while he himself did not wish to gawk at the rotting corpses of prisoners outside the city walls, his eyes very much did.

For some years now, Colin McGinn has been delighting and frustrating fellow philosophers with his enthusiastically scattershot approach to a stunning array of topics—Shakespeare, sport, movies, opera—many of which stand at some distance from what are considered the core concerns of his discipline. One might have seen a book on disgust coming.

In *The Meaning of Disgust* (Oxford, 2011), McGinn offers what he calls "impure philosophy," addressing a topic of broad interest beyond philosophy, considering numerous approaches, and synthesizing them into an intuitive, first-person, wide-ranging, and flawed work. He draws on philosophy, biology, psychology, and literature, and shows an impressive grasp of the relevant sources on the subject. (He, too, cites Kolnai as the *locus classicus* of any study of disgust.)

Yet the book does not seem terribly profound or insightful, let alone well-informed. (Nina Strohminger has called him out for serving up "bullshit" in place of even the slightest trace of familiarity with current psychological and cognitive-scientific research on the topic.) The key to understanding why might be found in a few disclaimers McGinn offers early in the book, effectively apologizing for taking up the topic of disgust. He promises not to aggravate us with euphemisms and dodginess, but also assures us that he will "try not to rub the reader's nose

too crudely in the subject matter of this study." He even concedes that, having written the book, he is no longer sure that "it is good for a person to immerse himself so deeply in these filthy waters."

McGinn does manage to relate one of the most obscene jokes I have ever heard, involving menstrual blood, fellatio, and at least two incestuous pairings. But he quickly follows it up with a sort of blush, asserting that "one's response is hardly even laughter, more a kind of reluctant grimace, as the 'joke' sinks in."

At which point I was thinking: Speak for yourself! There's something underhanded about telling a person a raunchy joke, making that person laugh, and then retracting it by adding that you yourself don't find it funny, but cited it only as an example of something. (Arthur Danto somewhere observes that obscenities cannot be harnessed into this distinction; willy-nilly, to mention a bad word is to use a bad word.) Rather differently than McGinn's impure philosophical work on movies, say, which was plainly a labor of love, one is left with the impression that he lacks the necessary relish to take on the topic of disgust.

Daniel Kelly's book, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (MIT Press, 2011), is the most sophisticated recent study on the topic, building on what is now a substantial body of empirical research into the neurophysiological and phenomenological dimensions of disgust. Kelly identifies his two principal aims as to develop "a proximate explanation that characterizes the psychological mechanisms underlying" disgust; and to produce "an ultimate explanation of the evolutionary pressures" that gave disgust its current form, that made it feel just the way it does.

Disgust has a pair of primary functions, he argues: one dietary, having to do with the avoidance of toxic foods; and the other involving the avoidance of "pathogens, parasites, and reliable indicators of their presence." He also develops a fairly compelling

account of how those two functions, ordinarily separate in other animal species, came together in humans and ultimately made disgust into a uniquely human affect, one implicated not just in the visceral experience of putrefaction or fecal stench but also in more culturally complex situations. Kelly brings us from the avoidance of rot and toxicity to the question of why we are disgusted by certain people.

Of particular interest to Kelly is the way that disgust is often rooted in a fallacious theory about another person's inferior group status. He cites Orwell's observation that the deepest reason for the existence of class antagonism is the belief among the upper classes that "the lower classes smell." He might also have mentioned the great early modern enemy of false belief, Sir Thomas Browne, who dedicated an entire chapter of his 1646 *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* to refuting the suggestion "that the Jews stink naturally." It is "a dangerous point to annex a constant property unto any Nation," Browne reasons, maintaining instead that it is only a prior aversion, rooted in what we would call xenophobia and prejudice, that creates such a stink.

According to Kelly, recent debates about disgust in ethics are weakened by an inadequate understanding of the emotion. He divides the debaters into two camps: the advocates (among whom we can place Kass), who believe that disgust may be "a trusted source of moral guidance," and the skeptics (among whom, Nussbaum), who believe that disgust is an impediment to clear moral reflection. Kelly's own position aligns him with the skeptics but also shows why a thorough evolutionary and cognitive account of disgust must precede any proposal to exclude it as a factor in moral reasoning. His book reveals just how deep-seated the mechanisms of disgust are, and thereby holds more promise for its eventual overcoming than do other skeptical approaches.

One complaint, which could justly be extended to most of the literature in cognitive science and experimental philosophy, is

that this literature does not take cross-cultural data seriously enough, and where it does, the data are obtained almost exclusively through the methods of empirical psychology rather than through the rich sources across the humanities, particularly history and anthropology. But, as I often say of the trend in philosophy of which Kelly is an outstanding representative, it is a very good start.

Now, ordinarily I would restrict my criticism of an author's work to the level of ideas, but here it seems fitting to mention that my copy of *Yuck!* smells, literally, awful. (Our children, with their digital screens, will have no idea that books once were the sort of things that could have an odor; yet for our ancestors, these objects, bound in animal hide and containing pages of smooth calfskin, were practically animals themselves, and, one imagines, no less capable of triggering disgust.) I do not know what substance MIT Press has put into its paper or ink (it may have been the packing materials), but in opening the book one gets an unmistakable whiff of something hard to place yet simultaneously suggestive of solvent and broccoli.

Kelly's book thus provides a sort of olfactory illustration of its subject matter. In fact, it richly confirms Korsmeyer's and Kolnai's accounts of disgust (that it always "seeks out its object," in Kolnai's expression). My first reaction was to cast the book away and go back to Nussbaum, to see if I could not find something there, on a second approach, that invites a more charitable take on her position, or if in fact she sees disgust, simply and conclusively, as an impediment to morality and as something to be overcome. A few pages back into Nussbaum, I found myself reaching for *Yuck!*, cracking open the covers, taking a deep sniff. It was disgusting. I did it again.

Justin E.H. Smith is university professor of history and philosophy of science at the University of Paris Diderot. He is the author of Divine Machines: Leibniz and the Sciences of Life (Princeton

University Press, 2011) and the forthcoming Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Early Modern Philosophy and the Concept of Race, also from Princeton.

16 Comments

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**Henry Vandenburg** · 2 years ago

Nice!

1 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**bdavi52** · 2 years ago

Much here to be relished; delightfully presented....but those earthworm pics!!!!

3 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**johnbarnes** → **bdavi52** · 2 years ago

Well, nobody loves her and everybody hates her. What else is she going to do?

(And of course, suggesting that she "eat worms and die" will cause many people to react with moral disgust, which I'm not sure is really any more than metaphorically linked to physical disgust).

5 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**bdavi52** → **johnbarnes** · 2 years ago

Excellent point... but is she eating the

Big fat juicy ones,

Eensie weensy squeensy ones, That only makes it that much more disgusting!

2 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**recovering_academic** · 2 years ago

Gross pics. Made grosser by the fact that she appears to like it.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Richard Grayson** · 2 years ago

Disgusting.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Gautam Bhatia** · 2 years ago

To your excellent article, I would only like to add: the poetry of Charles Baudelaire is perhaps the most outstanding example I have come across, which explores the relationship between beauty and repulsiveness. I recall a striking simile where he compares the pursuit of a lover to that of maggots swarming all over a carcass. He even has a poem called "The Cadaver"! I think Baudelaire understood the point that you're making in this article - that allure and disgust, beauty and decay - they cannot but go together.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**williamkraemer** · 2 years ago

It strikes me that everyone mentioned who is studying disgust is really flailing in the dark compared to Freud. The ridiculous thing is that they are all well aware that he has written on it. In fact, I'd imagine most have read Freud on disgust and are just ignoring it because Freud is no longer fashionable (or supposedly discredited). I'm not saying he has all the answers. But no one mentioned here (or, I suspect, anywhere else) comes close to the elegance of his attempts at answering questions about the nature of disgust. If you were dissatisfied by this article, as I was, read Freud on disgust.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**David Ehrenstein** · 2 years ago

Your argument is quite simple. You despise gay men and no one is going to take that delicious privilege of supposed heterosexual superiority and absolute omnipotence away from you.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**dank48** → David Ehrenstein · 2 years ago

Disgust seems to be in evidence here. On what basis this opinion was formed, I don't understand.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**EtienneFournier** · 2 years ago

Your privileged, superior and seemingly cultivated tone does little to disguise a belief that citizens engaging in homosexual acts should come under harsher legal scrutiny than those more heterosexually-inclined.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**dank48** → EtienneFournier · 2 years ago

Disgust seems to be in evidence here too. On what basis this opinion was formed, I don't understand either. (Personally, I love it when one person claims to be able to tell another person what that other person believes. There ought to be a name for that particular delusion, but I can't imagine what it might be.)

The disgust seems to cloud the judgment more than a little. The assumption that anyone engaging in *any* sexual acts, homosexual or heterosexual, should come under *any* legal scrutiny at all, harsh or otherwise, seems to originate in the mind of EtienneFournier. I don't see a hint of this imo bizarre assumption in Smith's article, even in the most "privileged, superior and seemingly cultivated" parts of the essay.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



This comment was deleted.

**dank48** → EtienneFournier · 2 years ago

Q.E.D.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**NM** · 2 years ago

So one writer "divides the debaters into two camps: the advocates (among whom we can place Kass), who believe that disgust may be "a trusted source of moral guidance," and the skeptics (among whom, Nussbaum), who believe that disgust is an impediment to clear moral reflection."

That distinction seems disgustingly Manichean, partly because both views seem eminently sensible.

I, myself, being of more refined disposition, ahem, tend to view disgust and desire as useful guides to behavior, yet not decisive in important matters. When the costs and benefits of a pending choice increase, I'll move beyond initial reaction to assess additional factors according to my limited allotment of time, IQ, knowledge and my circumstances, and gauge whether additional factors overcome my initial disgust or desire.

I try not begrudge people who lack the resources to make such resource-intensive decisions. They have to manage their lives -- and that of their kids --- as best they can, and are often wise to delegate routine decisions to the disgust/desire that emerges from nature, evolved Western culture, commonsense, etc.

In fact, I tend to find such cost-minimizing measures thoroughly delightful, partly because they allow resource-poor Americans to stand equal to Nussbaum in American society.

The association of complexity with moral and social status, however, smacks so much of snobbery that it revolts me.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Mogumbo Gono · 2 years ago

Disgusting.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



marcdevix · 2 years ago

I don't know what to say. This site is fantastic.
Presse

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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