

THAT'S DISGUSTING | YUCK! | THE MEANING OF DISGUST

That's Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion

Rachel Herz

[W. W. Norton & Co. \(\\$26.95\)](#)

Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust

Daniel Kelly

[A Bradford Book / MIT Press \(\\$30\)](#)

The Meaning of Disgust

Colin McGinn

[Oxford University Press \(\\$35\)](#)

by Jeremy Biles

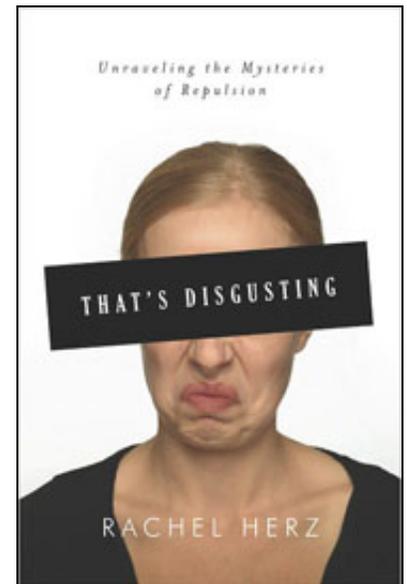
The cover of each of the three books under review here includes a photograph of someone making what is known as the “gape” or “yuck” face: upper lip curled, brow wrinkled, and nose scrunched in an expression of recoil, the universal signal for disgust. According to the authors, the very sight of the human countenance thus marred will function empathically in those who view it; beholding the signal of disgust engenders the emotion of disgust. If this is true, then emblazoning book covers with the gape face might seem an unwise marketing strategy; potential readers would be repelled by the images. But as Rachel Herz, Daniel Kelly, and Colin McGinn make clear, disgust is a highly complex emotion, a matter of both repulsion and attraction; there is something fascinating, even seductive, about disgust. Putting faces of disgust on the book covers is thus a means of intriguing an audience.

The authors themselves are clearly fascinated with disgust, each painting a distinctive portrait of the emotion—his or her own gape face. Though these portraits differ in important and sometimes irreconcilable ways, they are united in their participation in a wider current of intellectual investigation. As Kelly points out, disgust “has become relevant to discussions across the humanities, especially those engaging the cognitive sciences and those in the midst of the ‘affective turn.’” In fact, these three books are only among the most recent entries in a spate of

publications evidencing the academic “turn” to affects and the bodies in which they’re grounded; numerous books on corporeality, emotions, and specifically disgust have appeared over the past three decades, with writers seeking to suture close a Cartesian wound long in healing.

Herz, Kelly, and McGinn are convinced that disgust is a distinctly human emotion; it therefore speaks intimately, if often troublingly, to our species-condition. Though each writer takes a different approach to the subject matter—Herz is a psychologist building on her expertise in olfaction and emotion; Kelly is a philosopher steeped in the cognitive sciences and dedicated to empirical study; and McGinn is professor of philosophy interested in metaphysical questions—all three find disgust to be crucial to understanding the human condition. Herz concludes her book by claiming that “disgust holds a mirror up to us. This is why, by unraveling disgust, we can more fully understand what it means to be human.” McGinn echoes the sentiment in his parting comment: “To a considerable extent, disgust makes us what we are.” And Kelly, though rather more circumspect, affirms that disgust is integral to “the cognitive economy of modern humans.” But what exactly does disgust reveal about us?

In responding to this question, Rachel Herz proposes to unravel the “mysteries of repulsion,” as the subtitle of *That’s Disgusting* indicates. Herz’s study is a fine work of popular science—informative, synthetic, insightful, and written in clear, light-handed, lively prose. (If, like me, you’ll be taking an overseas plane ride this summer, consider picking up Herz’s book for the trip.) It also brims with illustrative (and titillating) anecdotes and examples involving everything from mephitic feet, mutilated bodies, and competitive eating to creeping insects, nose-picking, and political ideologies—not to mention unavoidable discussions of bodily excreta: “urine, vomit, phlegm, saliva, sweat, blood, pus, feces.”

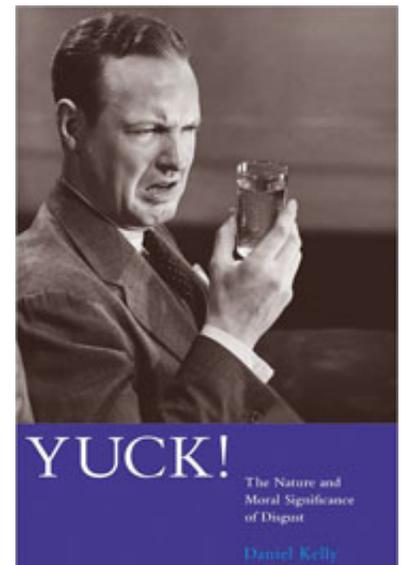


But *That’s Disgusting* is by no means a mere gross-out fest. Drawing upon a breadth of scientific research (including her own work on the psychology of smell and emotion), Herz pursues large claims concerning disgust: disgust “teaches us about the inner workings of our brains and personality”; it is “uniquely complex among human emotions”; and it “reveals the fundamental concerns that underlie our existence.” Universal but not innate, disgust is based in biology and “influenced by learning, context, and complex thought.” The overarching aim of the book is to

demonstrate the intimate association of disgust with death. Indeed, Herz claims that they are “fundamentally linked”: “disgust is fundamentally about our awareness of our own death and our terror of it.”

What precisely does death have to do with disgust? According to Herz, disgust has evolved as a form of fear, specifically the fear of our primary predator: pathogens. The emotion is an avoidance mechanism, the most “elemental purpose” of which is to “engender an avoidance of rotted and toxic food.” Of course, disgust may be elicited by a vast range and variety of things, far beyond food gone bad. Herz explains that the emotion has evolved from its “basic form” to include all manner of repulsions, from noxious fumes to immorality. Though its elicitors are many, what disgusting elements have in common is that they remind us of our vulnerable and imminently mortal bodies—our “animality.” In other words, the emotion arises when confronting things that make us aware of our fragile animal natures. Disgust is an avoidance response, and what it wants us to avoid is death. Unlike simple fear, however, disgust is a learned emotion, shaped by culture and context.

Daniel Kelly also trains attention on the interaction of evolutionary biology and culture in *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*. Potential readers should not be deceived by the goofy title of this book, which is distinctly at odds with the tone, subtlety, and sophistication of the book’s content. Kelly offers a highly nuanced philosophical account of disgust, in which readers will find themselves negotiating terms like “mood congruency,” “affect program,” “inferential signature,” and “antecedent functional overlap.” Despite (or perhaps because of) its highly technical nature, the discussion is lucid and the argument cogent, with the aims of each chapter stated clearly at the outset and rehearsed in each conclusion.



Kelly’s ambitious task in this concise but dense book is twofold. Surveying the rather disorganized state of research on disgust, one “primary goal . . . is to consolidate and organize the research on disgust.” This goal serves the larger ambition of constructing an integrated functional theory of disgust that would “bring order to the chaos.” With his first chapter, Kelly begins his procedure by delineating the “behavioral profile” of disgust, building upon and

organizing data from a wide range of cognitive-science studies. He lays out three elements that must be accounted for in order to achieve a complete theory of disgust: *unity of response* (the characteristic features of disgust response occur as a unified cluster); *variation of the elicitors* ("a large amount of variation exists in what is found disgusting, and so in what types of elicitors activate individual disgust systems"); and *diversity of the elicitors* (a "surprisingly diverse range of elicitors . . . trigger disgust . . . from the brutally physical and inert to the highly social and interpersonal").

The next three chapters proceed methodically in responding to these theoretical criteria. Chapter Two formulates Kelly's "Entanglement thesis," which explains how "different components of disgust . . . form a homeostatic cluster that we recognize as a single response type." The hypothesis pursued here is that "two distinguishable cognitive mechanisms that were once distinct . . . in the cognitive architecture" of humans underlie disgust. These distinct but "entangled" mechanisms have to do with food regulation and the avoidance of pathogens and parasites. The successful defense of this hypothesis satisfies the requirement to explain the unity of response. Chapter Three describes disgust's "sentimental signaling system," and in doing so accounts for the "flexibility of disgust's acquisition system and the variation . . . that it allows" —the second requirement. And Chapter Four outlines the "Co-opt thesis," which explains how disgust works in conjunction with different cognitive systems," and is "*redeployed* multiple times, in multiple domains, and in combination with several other systems." Explaining how a variety of things elicit disgust satisfies the final constraint on the theory. Conjoining the Entanglement and Co-opt theses in light of the behavioral profile allows Kelly to conclude his "construction of an integrated theory of disgust."

In short, then, disgust is a complex but unified emotion whose joint basis is food regulation and pathogen aversion; but it evolves over time to respond to a variety of things, including moral matters. In his final chapter, Kelly addresses the role of disgust in normative ethics, asking what role disgust "should play in moral reflection, deliberation, justification, and beyond." What follows is an incisive critique of "disgust advocates" like bioethicist and public intellectual Leon Kass, proponent of what Kelly terms the "Deep Wisdom theory," which sees disgust as a reliable moral indicator. Kass has famously claimed that "in crucial cases . . . repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it . . . Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder." Kelly decisively refutes this position, demonstrating that "the fact that something is disgusting is not even remotely a reliable

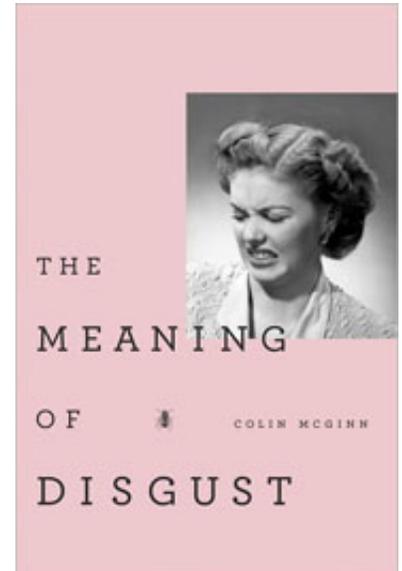
indicator of moral foul play. Disgust is not wise about or acutely attuned to ethical considerations . . . rather, repugnance is simply irrelevant to moral justification." In fact, disgust often presents ethical dangers, underwriting xenophobia, racism, and religious intolerance.

Kelly's resounding conclusion concerning disgust and normative ethics nicely supplements Colin McGinn's *The Meaning of Disgust*. McGinn dismisses the question of moral disgust as beyond the real purview of his study. Early in the book he notes (in terms that agree with Kelly's account) that disgust has "become recruited by the moral faculty," before remarking that he "shall not be much concerned with moral disgust from now on." Instead, McGinn asks, "What does disgust mean? What is its pith and point?" In contrast to Kelly's empirically grounded account, McGinn is not afraid to speculate about the nature—the very essence—of the emotion; he seeks to formulate a metaphysics of disgust. And whereas Herz draws upon colorful anecdotes to move her argument forward,

McGinn is more inclined toward thought experiments and introspection. Of the three volumes considered here, McGinn's is surely the most writerly. The author clearly delights in well-turned phrases; his eloquent language, though serving much speculation, is also evocative—at times even earthy—and, though hardly ribald, eschews euphemism. For instance, he is happy to correct Freud by insisting that snakes are less phallic than fecal symbols.

The pleasures of McGinn's text are many, and they go beyond the elegant prose. Though there is a tendency at times to proceed by way of unsupported assumptions, subjective impressions, and generalizations (the margins of my copy are littered with question marks), there is nonetheless a deep persuasive force to McGinn's account. The author opens by characterizing his text as a work of "impure philosophy" that blends philosophy, psychology, biology, and literature. In doing so, he "aims to uncover disagreeable truths about what we are, as self-conscious emotional beings with organic bodies." But these truths are not just disagreeable; they are positively tragic, and thus what McGinn writes is an "essay in species self-criticism, and self-pity. It is a sort of lamentation."

What turns a philosophical treatment of disgust into a lamentation? In short, McGinn believes that disgust is part of the tragedy of our human condition. We are a species whose self-



consciousness is both a boon and a curse. Capable of reflection, we are also confronted inevitably by the mortality that haunts our incarnated selves. Formulating a set of characteristics common to all things disgusting, and revealing what he takes to be the shortcomings of previous theories of disgust, McGinn observes that disgust is not merely an emotional reflex, but rather “rests upon certain *thoughts* about the world, specifically in relation to life and death.” As McGinn claims in a stirring passage, disgust is linked to a profound ambivalence:

What is disgusting is death *as presented in the form of living tissue*. It is death in the context of life that disgusts—the death or dying of the living. Not death *tout court*, but death in the *midst* of life, surrounded by it. Or again, it is the living *becoming dead*, making that dreadful transition . . . Disgust occurs in that ambiguous territory between life and death, when both conditions are present in some form: it is not life per se or death per se that disgusts, but their uneasy juxtaposition . . . What disgusts is the *interpenetration* of life and death.

The elaboration of McGinn’s “Death-in-Life” theory includes a critique of the theory that disgust arises with the recognition of animality and thus mortality (Herz’s basic position). It is rather the coincidence or “interpenetration” of the living and the dead that engenders the emotion. And if Kelly’s theory provides a rigorous account of the evolutionary function of disgust, McGinn provides a theory that illuminates the existential import of disgust: disgust involves the “tragic nature” of the “biological incarnation of consciousness.”

William James once remarked that rational proofs for the existence of God fail to move humans’ hearts, even if they produce notional assent. If McGinn’s account lacks the scientific rigor of Kelly’s theory, it nonetheless has the merit of speaking a truth with emotional resonance. Where it is least effective is not in its speculative but rather its more dogmatic moments. McGinn’s construal of the essence of art, for example, seems unaware of certain developments in contemporary art, and remains overly constrained by its weddedness to notions of classical beauty; it fails to take into account the history and possibilities of disgust within aesthetic production. “Art is intended to draw our attention away from our gross nature,” he writes, “to provide an alternative to that disturbing vision.”

A disturbing—and fascinating—vision emerges when these recent works by Herz, Kelly, and McGinn are read as a triad. What culminates in juxtaposing these accounts is a collective portrait of disgust more lively and nuanced than any single one. In this way, these three books, taken together, are like the obverse of Sir Francis Galton's famous study in which photographed faces are superimposed, resolving in a symmetrical composite, the "golden mean" of beauty. Here it is rather the varying emphases, approaches, and conclusions—the unresolved bumps and warts—that really make salient what is interesting about the complex and ambivalent emotion each book scrutinizes. Such a lumpy, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory portrait seems entirely appropriate for beauty's repellent yet seductive cousin, the disgusting.

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