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The Meanings of Disgusting Art

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Abstract

It has been recently argued, contrary to the received eighteenth-century view, that disgust is compatible with aesthetic pleasure. According to such arguments, what allows this compatibility is the interest that art appreciators sometimes bestow on the cognitive content of disgust. On this view, the most interesting aspect of this cognitive content is identified in meanings connected with human mortality. The aim of this paper is to show that these arguments are unsuccessful.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Disgust is generally considered one of a limited number of basic emotions, i.e. emotions that are standardly considered to be universally hard-wired in humans.ⁱ ⁱⁱ It should then come as no surprise that disgusting art (i.e. art that warrants an appreciator's response of disgust) has been around for nearly as long as art itself. Aspects of art that elicit disgust can be found in almost all ages, art forms, genres, and in many different artists.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, it is perhaps more striking that disgusting art has generally been neglected by aesthetics and philosophical thinking about the arts. Many other emotions, including variants of most basic emotions, have instead been discussed a lot more often (e.g. fear, anger, sadness, pity, not to talk about more pleasant emotions).

One period in which aesthetics addressed the role of disgust in art with some systematicity was the eighteenth century, especially in German-speaking circles. The issue was initially discussed in the writings of Johann Adolf Schlegel and of his brother Johann Elias, and subsequently by such venerable authors as Moses Mendelssohn, Gotthold E. Lessing and Immanuel Kant.^{iv} Although these authors showed some differences of opinion, they all expressed the negative view according to which disgust, unique amongst unpleasant emotions, was incompatible with aesthetic value—at least in the great majority of cases.^v ^{vi}

Either under the influence of this eighteenth-century view, or, to use Arthur Danto's phrase, of a general 'unmentionability' of disgust,^{vii} philosophical aesthetics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries generally (continued to) neglect disgust.^{viii} By contrast, sections of contemporary art history and criticism, as well as of

cultural theory, proved more systematically interested in disgusting art.^{ix} In fact, disgust appeared, and still appears to many, to be a conspicuous presence in the contemporary artworld. Such was for instance the opinion of art historian Jean Clair, former director of the Musée Picasso in Paris. As he pithily summarized it, '[T]he times of disgust have replaced the age of taste'.^x These circumstances have put extra pressure on the defenders of the traditional, eighteenth-century view sketched above.

It is time for a new cycle of serious philosophical engagement with disgusting art to start. Much has of course changed since the eighteenth century. In particular, we now have a significant amount of carefully collected evidence about the workings of disgust (courtesy of the experimental work done in the last three decades in the cognitive sciences). Moreover, philosophical mainstream views about art and value and, to some extent, about common artistic tastes have meanwhile become more open-minded. In particular, it has become difficult to endorse a view of the value of art that would have been common in the eighteenth century, viz. the view that makes artistic value coincide with aesthetic pleasure. For instance, it is easy to see that the value of disgusting art may in many cases reside in rewards that are to an extent *extrinsic* to the aesthetic-emotional experience narrowly construed. Of this kind are for example the *cognitive* rewards that for Noël Carroll are a crucial part of the artistic value that is distinctive of horror fictions.^{xi} Nonetheless, Carolyn Korsmeyer, in reviving the topic of disgusting art in contemporary aesthetics, has argued against both cognitive accounts *à la* Carroll and the received eighteenth-century view.^{xii} My central aim in this paper is to offer reasons to doubt the plausibility of Korsmeyer's account of the aesthetic value of disgusting art.

2. KORSMEYER

Arguing against accounts of disgusting art that locate its value in the cognitive rewards that it sometimes affords, Korsmeyer recently advocated a more holistic, integrated account that locates the value of disgusting art in the aesthetic-emotional experience itself. By contrast, arguing against the received eighteenth-century view of disgust as a poor ingredient for great art, she optimistically reaffirmed the potential of disgusting art to achieve the highest peaks of aesthetic value. Nonetheless, Korsmeyer's account of disgusting art's aesthetic value is close to the kind of general account of aesthetic value that many in the eighteenth century endorsed. In her own words, her aim is to

emphasize the capacity of disgust to impart an intuitive, felt grasp of the significance of its object. As Paul Guyer puts it in a summary of the contribution of Alexander Baumgarten [...] "The particular feature of sensory perception that is exploited for the unique pleasure of aesthetic experience ... is its *richness*, the possibility of conveying a lot of information through a single pregnant image..."^{xiii}

The key claim in Korsmeyer's view is that disgust can be part of aesthetic appreciation, its unpleasantness notwithstanding. This is so insofar as disgust offers cognitive riches that command an appreciator's interest and attention (or 'absorption', to use Korsmeyer's term). This is not, she clarifies, simply to say that cognitive rewards compensate for the emotion's unpleasantness. On her view, the appreciator can 'savour' disgust itself in virtue of the ideas that the emotion embodies. She argues that

‘emotions have meaning—have semantic content—that is delivered by the bodily changes that define them’.^{xiv} In a jargon that is more familiar to contemporary philosophical discussions of the emotions, the semantic content that an emotion can embody can be called the ‘cognitive’ content, or component, of the emotion.

In this respect, what for Korsmeyer is most distinctive of disgust, as well as especially apt to aesthetic appreciation, are meanings connected with human mortality. Disgust, she says, ‘means decay, putrefaction, disintegration: death’.^{xv} ^{xvi} But, she adds, fear, too, is semantically associated with death, for the fearsome also represents threats to our life. Nonetheless, the disgusting and the fearsome are associated with mortality in different ways. Unlike fearsome objects,

objects that disgust pose long-term threats that are all the worse for being absolutely inexorable. Disgust is more of a response to the *transition between life and death*...^{xvii}

On Korsmeyer’s view, then, fear and disgust are both associated with mortality, but disgust’s association with mortality is more specifically an association with the transition from life to death.^{xviii} It is worth noting at this point that Korsmeyer’s argument assumes that there is a one-way entailment between a semantic connection with the transition from life to death and a semantic connection with mortality. For her, fear and disgust both concern mortality but the latter’s association with the transition from life to death is what differentiates disgust from fear. The semantic entailment from life—death transition to mortality looks plausible enough: whatever transitions from life to death is necessarily mortal (even if, as Christians think of Jesus, this transition might be reversible).

However, the conceptual connection also runs the other way: whatever is mortal is such only insofar as it can, and at some point does, transition from life to death. Perhaps, however, Korsmeyer's notion of a *semantic connection* is meant to be more psychological than conceptual. In this sense, it would seem as though the transition from life to death more easily (e.g. more often, or for more people) *brings to mind*, or *makes one think of* mortality,^{xix} than mortality brings to mind transition from life to death. Nonetheless, this is an eminently empirical issue, which seems far from obviously settled.

For my purposes, however, settling this issue is not necessary, as I will argue that disgust is in no relevant way a response to *either* mortality *or* the transition from life to death. There are two ways in which Korsmeyer motivates the semantic connection between disgust and the transition from life to death. One way was already suggested in the passage quoted earlier: 'objects that disgust pose long-term threats that are all the worse for being absolutely inexorable'. In the light of the current best empirical understanding of disgust, it is in fact very plausible that disgust evolved to protect us from such long-term threats as diseases.^{xx} Nonetheless, not all disgust elicitors are threats to our well-being: worms are disgusting to many but are not especially dangerous in terms of human diseases; the same is true of cheese and other dairy products, which to some are disgusting.^{xxi}

The second motivation for disgust's connection with life—death transition that Korsmeyer offers is that, immediately after death, we rot and become individually indistinct like many disgusting things.

Disgust recognizes the communion of death
with the process of disintegration, along

with the subsequent devolution to life-forms where discrete individual identity is insignificant, giving way to swarms, nests, hives, infestations. [...] Reflection on the emotion leads to the nasty realization that the time will come when our own integrity will suffer the same indignities, that the exalted human will become one with the worm.^{xxii}

Besides the human corpse, several other common disgust elicitors are putrefying substances and thus bear some resemblance to humans after their death: animal corpses, of course, but also faeces, and organic rubbish more generally. Moreover, other common disgust elicitors can be characterized as individually indistinct in Korsmeyer's sense: e.g. worms and insects. Here again, however, counter-examples can be easily found, as many common disgust elicitors are neither rotting nor individually indistinct: amputated bodies, for instance, but also bodily secreta like spit and mucus.

3. ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

Some may not be convinced by my appeal to these counter-examples. Beyond threats to well-being and individual indistinctness, these critics would mention additional ways to connect particular disgust elicitors with the idea of mortality or of transition between life and death. One kind of option in this respect is offered by views that insist on disgust's alleged role in coping with our *fear of death*. Such views have their most influential instance in Rozin and collaborators' view of the disgusting (or at least of a proper sub-set of it) as a reminder of our animalness:^{xxiii} '[a]nything that reminds us that we are animals elicits disgust'.^{xxiv} On this view, one of the functions of disgust is

to keep us humans at a psychologically healthy distance from reminders of our own animal nature, and hence of our own mortality. Without disgust, on such a view, we would have been a lot less successful in our evolutionary fight for survival and reproduction, because *paralyzed* by the prospect of dying.

This view, initially quite influential (partly as a result of the pioneering and landmark status of Rozin and collaborators' overall work on disgust), has recently lost the favour of much of the scientific community (whilst many other aspects of their overall views and results on disgust are still very much mainstream).^{xxv} It is certainly true that a lot of common disgust elicitors bear some association with animalness, since most if not all of them are organic substances. However, the view that disgust is a defence against the idea of animalness is hardly compatible with the widespread evidence suggesting that we do not have any general aversion to animals. For one thing, as Royzman and Sabini point out, we share very many anatomical and behavioural features with non-human animals and a lot of these are not typically disgusting: legs, arms, eyes, walking, running, breathing, scratching, stretching etc. In fact, we have very favourable attitudes towards several features of many animals: cats and the way they jump, horses and their gait etc.^{xxvi}

It is also highly debatable that non-human animals have for us a special connection with mortality. We have ample occasion to witness mortality in our own species. If there is anything that we often associate with animals generally, that is perhaps a lack of intelligence, or elegance, or of civility (even though in the right circumstances even these associations are reversed: and so foxes are cunning, giraffes move graciously etc.).

Although from a decidedly more philosophical perspective, Colin McGinn has also argued for a connection between disgust and human mortality.^{xxvii} After putting forward counter-examples to many alternative accounts of the distinctive cognitive components of disgust, McGinn advances his own ‘death-in-life theory’. On this theory, what disgusts does so insofar as it reminds one, or makes one think of, ‘death *as presented in the form of living tissue*’.^{xxviii} For the purposes of the theory, however, not any life or death will do, but only ‘the notions of life and death *as they apply to a conscious being*’.^{xxix}

The three cognitive components here identified by McGinn, i.e. death, life and consciousness, are for him each necessary, but only jointly sufficient, for disgustingness. (For example, death is not sufficient, because, he suggests, bones are not disgusting.^{xxx}) On such a very common disgust elicitor as the (human) corpse, McGinn’s theory fares quite well: corpses are disgusting because they make us think of death; but they also make us think of life (for corpses bear some signs of life, e.g. in the form of bacterial activity). Moreover, they make us think of life and death, *as these apply to conscious, human beings*. (Here I understand McGinn’s theory as requiring only a general connection with life and death as they apply to a conscious being. The formulation appealing to ‘death as presented in the form of living tissue’ is certainly more suggestive, but it is also too metaphorical to be handled with ease. Corpses are not literally *death*.) The case of corpses also fits well with Korsmeyer’s idea of a transition from life to death (even if McGinn’s account is not obviously concerned with such a transition).

However, McGinn’s theory has much more trouble with other disgust elicitors. To be sure, the formulation of his

theory that I am considering has quite a wide scope. This is it:

(MGD) Something is disgusting if and only if it reminds us of life and death as they apply to a conscious being.

Still, the theory suffers from serious difficulties, including the existence of counter-examples on both the sufficiency and the necessity sides of MGD. Of the disgustingness of faeces, for instance, McGinn says that ‘life and death exist co-presently in’ them.^{xxx1} There is death in them because they are the end-product of digestion: ‘the digestive process takes living things as input and delivers dead things as output [...] the rectum is a grave’.^{xxxii} But there is also life in them, insofar as digestion, of which they are a part, is a living process and ‘the very foundation of all animal life’.^{xxxiii} Moreover, faeces are organic matter (life) but seem inanimate (death). This characterization of faeces may be thought-provoking as a cultural analysis of some people’s perceptions of bodily excreta. But it puts under stress the plausibility of McGinn’s theory. His reasons for faeces’ being at the same time dead and alive are essentially metaphorical or figurative—and, in fact, involve several different metaphors and figures of speech. Faeces are dead *qua* end-product of digestion (end-as-death), or they are dead as they do not move (death-as-immobility). By contrast, they are alive because they take part in life (metonymy), but also because they are organic matter (possibly the only literal statement or, in another sense, metonymical).

The appeal to metaphors is in principle acceptable for a theory that relies on associations of ideas, or to what-makes-one-think-of.^{xxxiv} Nonetheless, McGinn needs to come up with such a variety of distinct ways to figuratively

connect disgust elicitors (often very widely shared ones) with MGD, that the plausibility of MGD as an account of disgustingness starts to become seriously questionable.

Take spit and mucus. McGinn talks about the latter in a footnote and attributes disgustingness to it as something that reminds us of life, insofar as it used to be part of a living, conscious organism; insofar as it is no longer part of such an organism, however, mucus also calls to mind death (death-as-cessation or death-as-exit). In this, McGinn says, mucus resembles faecal matter, which ‘dies [...] when released from the anus’.^{xxxv} A similar reasoning can be applied to spit.

In the same vein, amputated bodies would likely be disgusting, for McGinn, as they remind one of the missing, amputated part of the living, conscious organism. But, why are some *deformed* bodies disgusting? Think of the limbs of an elephantiasic or of The Elephant Man’s face in the 1980 eponymous Lynch movie: no part of the body in these cases is or appears severed. If anything, the relevant disgustingness seems to arise from *excess*, rather than from subtraction. Here, too, of course, McGinn might be able to suggest an ingenious connection. As is the case with resemblance, metaphors and figures of speech can pretty much connect anything with anything else. The issue however remains the *plausibility* of such a connection as a reason for disgust.

Finally, and even less plausibly, McGinn attributes the disgustingness of some insects (those that do not have frequent contact with faeces or with other disgust elicitors) to their ‘lying *between* life and death’.^{xxxvi} They are alive, obviously, but they are ‘also curiously machinelike—with [their] hard exterior, [their] coolness to the touch, and [their] mechanical behavior’; they are ‘close to tiny

robots'.^{xxxvii} Here McGinn's suggestion is that machines and robots remind us of death because they are lifeless (another metonymy). And yet, robots are not disgusting because, McGinn adds, 'they are not organic'.^{xxxviii} Fair enough, but then why should the figures of speech stop at this? Why, for instance, does robots' *animation* not remind us of *life*?

Against William Ian Miller's suggestion that what really disgusts is the life soup, or 'the capacity for life', McGinn himself correctly suggests the following:^{xxxix}

what makes certain life processes disgusting and others not? We need an independent criterion of the disgusting to answer that question, since the concept of life itself is too broad to capture the range of objects that disgust us. Talk of soup [...] is all well and good, but these are metaphors, in need of literal interpretation.^{xl}

Well said—and McGinn's own account is vulnerable to this very same criticism.^{xli}

4. THE FORMAL OBJECT OF DISGUST

One may still object that the existence of the counterexamples advanced in the previous two sections should not be seen as a problem for Korsmeyer's account of the aesthetic value of disgust. In fact, this objection would go, Korsmeyer might choose to retreat from a general understanding of disgust as a response to the transition from life to death, to a less ambitious understanding on which only *some* disgusting things hold the requisite semantic association with human life and mortality. However, this is not a move of which Korsmeyer can avail

herself without radically changing her account of the value of disgusting art. The semantic association to which Korsmeyer appeals is in fact meant to be part of the *cognitive content* of the emotion of disgust. As I noted earlier, the aesthetic value of disgust for her does not lie in a merely extrinsic connection (e.g. a co-occurrence) between certain ideas associated with an object, and a certain feeling or emotion directed towards the same object. A merely extrinsic connection would in fact make the aesthetic value of disgusting art best accounted for by a cognitivist theory. Instead, the meanings to which Korsmeyer appeals cannot but be part of disgust's cognitive content. What this means can be clarified in terms of the notion of the *formal object* of an emotion.

On a rough-and-ready characterization, the formal object of an emotion is the property that an emotion ascribes to its *intentional* object (or to the object that the emotion is about).^{xliii} The formal object of fear, for instance, is the property of *being immediately threatening* (or of *being immediately threatening to the prospective emoter or to those that she cares about*). Part of what it means to be afraid of something, in other words, is to understand that something as an immediate threat. Similarly, the formal object of anger is *thwarting desires or expectations* or *being a demeaning offense* (of/to the emoter's or those that she cares about), and the formal object of sadness is *being a loss* (for the emoter etc.).^{xliiii}

More generally, emotions have a cognitive content in the sense that they ascribe a formal object to their intentional object. It is only in virtue of such an ascription that Korsmeyer's view of emotions' embodiment of meanings can be understood. The meaning that fear embodies, for instance, is necessarily something to do with the threat that the feared thing poses. If this is correct, then Korsmeyer is

committed to saying that the formal object of disgust is, or has something important to do with, the transition between life and death. Moreover, since embodied meanings for Korsmeyer work as sources of aesthetic appreciation, the formal object of disgust has to figure, with some non-null degree of awareness, in the experience of an emoter/appreciator. Although emotional experience will not be conscious all of the time, embodiment of meanings without any (even just potential) awareness on the part of the appreciator is not very useful from the point of view of aesthetic appreciation.

As a consequence, Korsmeyer's view is in tension with the fact, noted earlier, that there are things deemed disgusting that do not have properties importantly connected with human mortality (i.e. worms, cheese, spit etc.). Not only do such things lack the relevant properties, but they are *known* (by emoters) to lack those properties. Someone who is disgusted by such things does not thereby ascribe those properties to them. In other words, the formal object of disgust—at least insofar as an emoter can be aware of it—should not be characterized in terms of anything like human mortality or the transition from life to death.

One may object that this is an unjustified conclusion. Why is the case of disgust in fact not like the fear that some of us have towards perfectly harmless things or situations, e.g. the proverbial small dog? On one way to cash out the scenario, one knows that the small dog is not harmful, but one is afraid anyway. Firstly, however, scenarios like this are sufficiently rare in the population for them to be outlier cases, whereas the disgust counter-examples cited earlier are not nearly as rare. Secondly, and relatedly, many feel entitled to consider one's fear of the small dog as *irrational*, and perhaps even deserving of mockery. The case of disgust is again different, as I doubt many would

dismiss someone's disgust for worms or spit as irrational, or mock them for it.

Another possible objection concerns my earlier characterizing as very plausible the view that disgust evolved to defend us from such long-term threats as diseases. If the distinctive evolutionary benefit of disgust centres on long-term threats, then it would seem that disgust's formal object would do, too. In fear, after all, the two things are intimately connected: the formal object (i.e. being threatening) and the likely evolutionary benefit of fear (i.e. alerting to and protecting from threats).

However, disgust does not achieve its evolutionary benefit in the same way that fear (and several other emotions) do. Fear achieves it by incorporating a concern with threats in its formal object in the way described. Generally speaking, I am afraid of something if and only if I (more or less consciously) find it threatening. Disgust achieves a similar goal, but does so differently.

On the best scientific view of disgust currently available, each of us has a hard-wired set of things or features of things that we are prepared to find disgusting.^{xliv} As a consequence of such *preparedness*, each of us will find it easier to acquire disgust towards items in their preparedness set than towards items outside of it. Which things one will be disposed to find disgusting depends on the process of disgust acquisition. Disgust acquisition mostly, typically, happens in an early ontogenetic window, and is heavily influenced by the input provided to the baby by parents or tutors (e.g. during toilet training). Afterwards, one's list of disgust elicitors can lose or acquire members. The important point, however, is that, in both early and later life, the main disgust acquisition routes are evaluative conditioning (i.e. stimuli become disgusting by co-

occurring often with other, already disgusting, or otherwise undesirable ones) and the law of contamination (i.e. things become disgusting through contact with other things that are independently deemed disgusting).^{xlv}

Among other things, this means that disgust is, as some have called it, a peculiarly ‘plastic’ emotion.^{xlvi} Each of us will not necessarily have all of the members of their hard-wired preparedness set on their list of disgust elicitors, nor will each item on this list necessarily be from their hard-wired preparedness set.^{xlvii} As a consequence of the peculiarities of the disgust mechanism, disgust elicitors come to be of many different kinds. In fact, some go so far as to say that it is ‘highly implausible [...] that disgust elicitors all share some property above and beyond triggering disgust’.^{xlviii} Moreover, typically, the (distal) reasons behind our disgust reactions are either buried in our hard-wired preparedness set, or in our past history of experiences (evaluative conditioning), or concern a history of contact with other disgust elicitors (law of contamination).^{xlix} Consequently, there is no other way to characterize the formal object of disgust, at least insofar as this is relevant to aesthetic appreciation, except as in terms of the very property of *disgustingness*, or of the properties that are conceptually entailed by it: e.g. a disgust elicitor’s unappealingness-to-contact, or its perceived power to ‘contaminate’ or to make other things disgusting through contact—or even perhaps the inchoate idea of its representing an unspecified threat.¹ Such properties are not significantly connected with ideas of mortality or of transition from life to death.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing here that I am not suggesting that disgust has *no* formal object. What I am suggesting is simply that, if disgust has a formal object, this cannot be formulated in a way that is both (in principle)

accessible to consciousness (and hence directly valuable to aesthetic appreciation) and non-circular (i.e. in a way that does not refer back to disgustingness itself). In fact, contemporary attempts to formulate the formal object of disgust follow two general routes. Either the formulation is circular (i.e. is in terms of disgustingness^{li} or of conceptually related properties^{lii}), or it appeals to pre-conscious determining factors (e.g. is in terms of disgust's evolutionary design^{liii}). It is an interesting question, and one that divides scholars, that of whether a characterization of the formal object of an emotion in terms of that emotion is *viciously* circular.^{liv} The answer to this question crucially depends on what theoretical work one wants the notion of *formal object* to do and on how one defines it. I do not want to settle these issues here. The impossibility to formulate a consciously accessible and non-circular formal object for disgust is sufficient for my purposes. If there is no such thing, then Korsmeyer's appeal to ideas of mortality cannot be useful in an account of the aesthetic value of disgust.

5. MORAL DISGUST AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The upshot of this paper then is that Korsmeyer is wrong to claim that there is an internal connection between disgust and the transition from life to death, or mortality generally, that is relevant to aesthetic appreciation. This leaves open the problem of accounting for the aesthetic value of disgust (including the issue of whether or not there is such a thing). What I have done is, however, to formulate some restrictions and caveats on the kinds of meanings that can form the cognitive component of disgust. These considerations should inform future research.

Also a matter for future research is the role in art of what is often called 'moral disgust', including the plausibility of a mortality account for morally disgusting art. My focus in

this paper has been on disgust as the reaction that is frequently elicited by such bodily or material things as faeces and corpses. According to the vast majority of contemporary cognitive science researchers, this is the core or original disgust reaction.^{lv} However, several other phenomena—some but not all of which emotional or affective—are also often called ‘disgust’: from the extreme lack of sexual interest in a potential partner to the profound dislike for certain fashion trends or styles of music. These phenomena are related to (bodily) disgust in various ways, depending on the theories and on the specific cases in question; and the relevant kinds of relationships vary from a merely metaphorical connection to identity.

According to a plausible view, bodily disgust is the evolutionarily primitive affective mechanism that is then adapted (possibly starting from our evolutionary past) to serve functions other than pathogen avoidance in domains such as the sexual (mate selection and avoidance) and the moral (social interaction management). Given the diversity in functions, some, but not necessarily all, components of the bodily disgust response are also part of the responses that are typical of disgust-related mechanisms in other domains.^{lvi}

Moral disgust in particular is an interesting case, because it shares many features of the bodily disgust response, and yet its elicitors are often very different kinds of things from the common elicitors of bodily disgust. Although sometimes moral disgust may be elicited by such bodily activities as gay sex (arguably eliciting in those who feel it a mixture of bodily and moral disgust), frequent moral disgust elicitors are such things as deception, Ponzi-scheme scams or terrorist attacks. Moreover, moral disgust elicitors are often actions or behaviours, rather than objects as is more commonly the case with bodily disgust. On the other hand,

there is reliable evidence that moral disgust is sometimes accompanied by many of the behavioural and physiological aspects of the disgust response.^{lvii} Moral disgust is also sometimes accompanied by behavioural and phenomenological responses appropriate to (sometimes even physical) contamination.^{lviii}

Nevertheless, bodily disgust is not the whole story in moral disgust. Judgements of morality are important in moral disgust, but not nearly as much (if at all) in bodily disgust—and so are anger, indignation, sometimes contempt etc.^{lix} This is so notwithstanding the suggestion that is sometimes expressed by the characterization of disgust as a “moralizing emotion” (i.e. the suggestion that judging something as disgusting is sometimes sufficient for judging that thing as morally negative). This suggestion does not in fact necessarily concern all (or even most) of what is disgusting. Moreover, the evidence in support of said suggestion is still far from conclusive.^{lx} The consequence of the complex nature of moral disgust is that accounting for the aesthetic value of morally disgusting art will require a lot of future work. Such work will however be able to build on the considerations concerning bodily disgust raised in this paper.^{lxi}

NOTES

ⁱ From now on, unless otherwise specified (see especially §5), I use ‘disgust’ (and its cognates) to refer to bodily disgust (i.e. the emotion that most of us have towards faeces, urine, animal carcasses etc.). Outside of the scope of the present investigation are elicitors of moral, social, and other disgusts, and the emotional responses that they elicit. This is in keeping with the scope of Korsmeyer’s views. Cf. especially Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

ⁱⁱ From Darwin onwards, the vast majority of contemporary emotion theorists consider disgust as one of the basic emotions. The few authors

who disagree with the consensus do so not because they disagree with the universality and hard-wiredness of the disgust mechanism, but rather because they consider disgust as not cognitively sophisticated enough to be classified as an emotion; cf. Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and Edward B. Royzman and John Sabini, ‘Something it takes to be an emotion’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 31 (2001), 29—60 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00145>).

ⁱⁱⁱ From Hesiod, Sophocles, Dante, Caravaggio and Rembrandt, through to Hermann Nitsch and Damien Hirst, all sorts of artists have produced disgusting art. Even Paleolithic art appears to offer examples of disgusting art, or at least examples of art that represents the disgusting (e.g. blood from wounds or animals defecating), as R. Dale Guthrie suggests in his *The Nature of Paleolithic Art* (The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 270 ff.

^{iv} For a rich and well-informed historical account of these authors’ remarks, see Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust* (State University of New York Press, 2003), 25 ff. Across the Channel, other eighteenth-century authors also discussed the issue to some extent, especially Edmund Burke, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by J.T. Boulton (Routledge, 1757/1958), 85—86. Burke’s views are more nuanced than those advocated by his German-speaking contemporaries, with the exception of Lessing’s (see below).

^v Most of them in fact advocated the even stronger view that what is disgusting in nature could not be represented in the fine arts without this being an aesthetic flaw of the work. Most of them held the view that what is disgusting in nature cannot but be disgusting in art as well. Cf. Filippo Contesi, ‘Korsmeyer on Fiction and Disgust’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (2015), 109—16 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayu014>).

^{vi} In the *Laocoön*, ed. by Edward A. McCormick (Bobbs-Merrill, 1766/1962), Lessing advocated a somewhat more nuanced view than his contemporaries, according to which there are some cases, especially in literary works, in which disgust is compatible with aesthetic value (e.g. 132). Lessing also questioned the uniqueness of disgust with respect to its problematic role in art: he extended the peculiar place of disgust amongst unpleasant ‘sensations’ to ‘ugliness of forms’ or to ‘the perception of physical ugliness’ (Lessing, *Laocoön*, 126 and 130).

^{vii} ‘There is, significantly, very little notice given to the disgusting in the history of aesthetics from Kant to Jean Clair. [...] Aesthetics itself has been regarded as part of what Santayana designates as the Genteel Tradition, in which the disgusting, because unmentionable, was

unmentioned, and art was taken as logically incapable of giving offense: if it gave offense, it was after all not art.’ (Arthur Danto, ‘Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A defense of contemporary art’, *Tout-Fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal* 1(3) (2000)

<http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/News/Danto/danto.html>.)

^{viii} The most notable exception is Karl Rosenkranz, who devotes section B. III. b) of the fourth part of his 1853 monograph *Aesthetics of the Ugly* to ‘The Nauseating’. Not dissimilarly from Lessing, Rosenkranz considers the disgusting as a type of ugliness and admits a few instances of good artistic use of the disgusting. In Rosenkranz’s case, the disgusting, and the ugly more generally, are artistically valuable insofar as they serve the vicarious role of highlighting the value of the beautiful. See Rosenkranz, *Estetica del Brutto* (Aesthetica, 2004), 203—209.

^{ix} For a couple of recent examples, see e.g. Michel Chaouli, ‘Van Gogh’s Ear’, in Frances Connelly (ed.), *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47—62, and the Kristeva-influenced Michelle Meagher, ‘Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust’, *Hypatia* 18 (2003), 23—41 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2003.tb01411.x>).

^x Clair’s phrase is even pithier in the original French, where ‘disgust’ and ‘taste’ share the same root: ‘Les temps du dégoût a remplacé l’âge du goût’ (*De Immundo* (Galilée, 2004), as cit. in Tedeschini, ‘On the Good Life of Disgust’, *Lebenswelt* 3, 200 (2013)). <http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/2240-9599/3484>

^{xi} See Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (Routledge, 1990), esp. chapter 4. Although Carroll nominally discusses disgust as part of the response of ‘art-horror’, his discussion is marred by his embracing a Mary-Douglas-inspired view of disgust as categorial violation. In so doing, his analysis ends up concerning a different phenomenon or set of phenomena from bodily disgust, one that is far from extensionally identical with the latter. For a critique of views of disgust as categorial violation, see e.g. Paul Rozin and April Fallon, ‘A perspective on disgust’, *Psychological Review* 94 (1987), 23—41, 29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037//0033-295X.94.1.23>

^{xii} See Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*. It is however worth noting that Carole Talon-Hugon’s *Goût et dégoût* (Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 2003) anticipates many of the themes later developed in Korsmeyer’s book.

^{xiii} Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 8. The quotation is from Guyer, *Values of Beauty* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); author’s

emphasis. Here I take Korsmeyer to be extending Guyer's use of the word 'image' to include emotions or feelings.

^{xiv} Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 28. Here Korsmeyer approvingly describes an aspect of the theory advanced in Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions* (Oxford University Press, 2004). She endorses this aspect of Prinz's theory more explicitly at 30: 'The manner in which Prinz articulates appraisals, in which it is the bodily feeling itself that possesses semantic content, indicates an especially useful way to understand aesthetic apprehensions involving disgust.' Korsmeyer's general view of emotion is by her own admission syncretistic in its attempt to capture what is good in each of the major competing theories of emotion. It would therefore be misleading to extend her endorsement of Prinz's theory beyond the few remarks quoted.

^{xv} Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 122.

^{xvi} See also: 'In any event, the occasions for aesthetic disgust that interest me most are those for which I want to claim a strong degree of insight and truth about *human* frailty and *mortality*, for which disgust in its material, visceral version plays a far-reaching and subtle role' (Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 5; emphasis mine); and, 'Insofar as disgust plays a role in such insights, it places us in intimate contact with *mortality*—for we do not simply think about the transience of existence, we register its inevitability in our very viscera' (Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 100; emphasis mine).

^{xvii} Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 122; emphasis mine.

^{xviii} Korsmeyer's view is explicitly inspired by some remarks made by Aurel Kolnai, 'Disgust', in his *On Disgust*, ed. by Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Open Court, 1929—1998/2004). For a contemporary Kolnai-inspired view of disgust, see Colin McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust* (Oxford University Press, 2011); see *infra* for more on this view.

^{xix} The latter is the expression used by Colin McGinn, in an understanding of the semantic connection along the more psychological lines in question (see e.g. *The Meaning of Disgust*, 82, and below in this paper).

^{xx} See Valerie Curtis and A. Biran, 'Dirt, disgust, and disease', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 44 (2001), 17—21 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pbm.2001.0001>).

^{xxi} *Others* might simply dislike cheese, i.e. find it distasteful. But *distaste* is not the same attitude as *disgust*. As Rozin and Fallon, 'A perspective on disgust' point out, there are distasteful things that do not disgust (I encourage my reader to take their pick: for me it is chicory and green beans, within the edible, and clean sand outside of it). Also, a

lot of what disgusts does not do so because it tastes bad: in fact, most of us do not even know what many of the most common disgust elicitors taste like (think e.g. of insects or faeces). One crucial output difference between distaste and disgust is the capacity of elicitors of the latter to pass on disgustingness to (or ‘contaminate’) almost anything that gets in contact with them.

^{xxii} Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust*, 123.

^{xxiii} Such views share key claims, and are sometimes even identified, with so-called ‘Terror Management Theories’. These latter theories are inspired by anthropologist Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* (Simon & Schuster, 1973).

^{xxiv} Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, ‘Disgust’, in Michael Lewis, J. Haviland-Jones and L. Feldman Barrett (eds), *Handbook of Emotions* (Guildford Press, 2008), 757—776, 761.

^{xxv} For a review of criticisms advanced to Rozin and colleagues’ animal-reminder view of disgust, see Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, and DeScioli, ‘Disgust: Evolved function and structure’, *Psychological Review* 120 (2013), 65—84, 2—3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0030778>

^{xxvi} See Royzman and Sabini, ‘Something it takes’, 44—47.

^{xxvii} See McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*. Like Korsmeyer’s, McGinn’s view is also explicitly inspired by Kolnai’s phenomenological study of disgust.

^{xxviii} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 89—90 (author’s emphasis).

^{xxix} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 94 (author’s emphasis).

^{xxx} Korsmeyer makes the same point about bones (*Savoring Disgust*, 123).

^{xxxi} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 102.

^{xxxii} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 101.

^{xxxiii} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 102.

^{xxxiv} This appeal to metaphors is instead much more problematic if one considers McGinn’s wider view of disgustingness as an *objective* property. According to McGinn, if Martians were to be disgusted by crystals but not by faeces, they would be wrong (see *The Meaning of Disgust*, 61). An account of disgustingness that relies so heavily on figurative speech and thought is hardly compatible with a view of disgustingness as an objective, rather than a culturally constructed, property.

^{xxxv} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 102.

^{xxxvi} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 114 (author’s emphasis).

^{xxxvii} Ibid.

^{xxxviii} Ibid.

^{xxxix} Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 40.

^{xl} McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*, 81.

^{xli} Similar points to those made in this section were also made in Strohming, 'The Meaning of Disgust: A refutation', *Emotion Review* 6 (2014), 214—216 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1754073914523072>), in a somewhat more aphoristic fashion.

^{xlii} Cf. Ronald de Sousa, 'Emotion', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/emotion/>>.

^{xliii} It is perhaps worth pointing out here that one of the theoretical functions of a formal object is to account for the unity of an emotion and for its difference from other emotions. This rules out the option of having more than one formal object for disgust, which might have helped Korsmeyer's case.

^{xliv} See Rozin and Fallon, 'A perspective on disgust', 38—9.

^{xlv} See Curtis, de Barra and Aunger, 'Disgust as an adaptive system for disease avoidance behaviour', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 366 (2011), 389—401 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2010.0117>). Curtis et al. also identify as a third route the Garcia effect (i.e. the kind of aversion that one may for instance develop to, say, sardines, after eating too many of them and having an indigestion). However, I prefer not to consider Garcia-effect aversions as instances of disgust. Crucially, the former lack the capacity that the latter have to transmit disgustingness according to the law of contamination. The Garcia effect was actually identified for the first time in rats, which are taken by most (albeit crucially not by Curtis) only to have proto-components of the human disgust response; cf. Garcia, Kimeldorf and Koelling, 'Conditioned aversion to saccharin resulting from exposure to gamma radiation', *Science* 122 (1955), 157—158 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1752118>), and Daniel R. Kelly, *Yuck!* (MIT Press, 2011).

^{xlvi} Cf. Christopher Knapp, 'De-moralizing Disgustingness', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (2003), 253—278, 255. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2003.tb00261.x>

^{xlvii} Arguably, in fact, such plasticity is evolutionarily useful in itself as it allows for a modulation of the protection afforded by the disgust response according to, for instance, particular environmental specificities. It is also, according to some, what allows disgust to extend its operative scope to, e.g., the sexual and moral domains. See Kelly, *Yuck!*, and Tybur et al., 'Disgust'.

^{xlviii} Daniel Kelly, *Yuck!* (MIT Press, 2011), 27. A similar view is advanced by Royzman and Sabini, ‘Something it takes’ (although they rather talk of the absence of a single common ‘abstract property’ or ‘abstract proposition’).

^{xlix} Our *proximate* reasons for disgust can be instead much more accessible to our consciousness. For instance, being disgusted by mucus is typically dependent on believing or imagining that what we are disgusted by actually *is* mucus (cf. Rozin and Fallon, ‘A perspective on disgust’ and Contesi, ‘Korsmeyer on Fiction and Disgust’).

However, proximate reasons of this kind are not relevant to my purposes here, as they are neither part of an emotion’s formal object, nor can they be said on their own to be part of the meanings that an emotion embodies. Fear of a tiger approaching, for instance, may embody ideas that concern the way in which the tiger moves its steps on the ground, but only *insofar* as these steps are threatening. The tiger’s stepping towards me in the way that it does is not necessarily (or in all possible worlds) connected with fear, but only insofar as fear is the emotion that responds to immediate threats.

¹ With respect to the latter, the inchoateness is a consequence of the way disgust works, as I have described it in this paper. Other emotions involve ideas of threat, for instance fear, but in a richer and more distinct sense. As Kolnai illuminatingly says with respect to the distinction between disgust and fear: ‘disgust has often been apprehended as a mere variant of fear—a conception whereby we should somehow also experience fear of what is disgusting, a fear which is however characterized by a peculiar additional quality. Many disgusting objects are, as is well-known, harmful or dangerous, *yet without displaying directly that open gesture of threat* which belongs to what is fearful in the narrowest sense, such as those forces of nature, living beings, and events by which human beings can be seized and crushed. [...] But this conception is not tenable, for there is a well-known mode of fear or anxiety that pertains to concealed and nebulous dangers without having anything to do with disgust at all. In order to produce disgust, elements are required *which are totally different from those which produce insidious threats, and the latter may be entirely absent in the presence of disgusting objects*’ (‘Disgust’, 46—7; emphases mine).

li de Sousa, ‘Emotion’: ‘I am disgusted because it *is disgusting*’ (emphasis mine).

^{lii} Richard Lazarus: ‘[t]aking in or being too close to an indigestible object or idea (metaphorically speaking)’ (*Emotion and Adaptation*, Oxford University Press, 1991, as cit. in Prinz, *Gut Reactions*, 16).

Lazarus does not talk of ‘formal object’ but uses the (in many ways equivalent) notion of a *core relational theme*; see also Prinz, *Gut Reactions*, 80; Jonathan Haidt, threatening contamination (as reported in Royzman and Sabini, ‘Something it takes’, 48); Alexandra Plakias, being ‘contaminated and contaminating’ (‘The Good and the Gross’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (2013), 261—278, 262).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10677-012-9334-y>

^{liii} Tybur et al., ‘Disgust’, esp. 66—67.

^{liv} Cf. for instance de Sousa, ‘Emotion’, who only finds ‘an appearance of tautology’ in adopting such a characterization; on the other side, cf. Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, (Routledge, 1963), who, in his very introduction of the notion of an emotion’s formal object to the contemporary debate, specifies that: ‘A formal object should not be confused with an internal accusative, such as occurs in the expressions “to dream a dream”, “to play a game”’ (190). Cf. also Julien Deonna and Fabrice Teroni, *The Emotions* (Routledge, 2012), 41—42 for a view of the latter kind.

^{lv} Some views that are more common in psychoanalytic, literary and anthropological circles, however, take (or at least can be construed as taking) socio-moral disgust as the basis for disgust generally. See Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, and Susan B. Miller, *Disgust: The gatekeeper emotion* (Routledge, 2004).

^{lvi} See Tybur et al., ‘Disgust’, and Tybur, Lieberman and Griskevicius, ‘Microbes, mating, and morality: Individual differences in three functional domains of disgust’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97 (2009), 103—122 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0015474>).

^{lvii} For a review of such evidence, see Rozin, Haidt and Fincher, ‘From oral to moral’, *Science* 323 (2009), 1179—1180 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1170492>). See also Danovitch and Bloom, ‘Children’s extension of disgust to physical and moral events’, *Emotion* 9 (2009), 107—112 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0014113>).

^{lviii} See Haidt, Rozin, McCauley and Imada, ‘Body, Psyche, and Culture: The relationship between disgust and morality’, *Psychology and Developing Societies* 9 (1997), 107—131 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/097133369700900105>), and, more recently, Plakias, ‘The Good and the Gross’.

^{lix} See e.g. Gutierrez, Giner-Sorolla and Vasiljevic, ‘Just an anger synonym? Moral context influences predictors of disgust word use’, *Cognition and Emotion* 26 (2012), 53—64 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2011.567773>).

^{lx} Pizarro, Inbar and Helion, ‘On disgust and moral judgment’, *Emotion Review* 3 (2011), 267—268 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1754073911402394>).

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