



THE  
MEANING

OF  COLIN MCGINN

DISGUST

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# The Meaning of Disgust

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COLIN MCGINN

OXFORD  
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
McGinn, Colin, 1950–

The meaning of disgust / Colin McGinn.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-0-19-982953-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Aversion. I. Title.  
BF575.A886M36 2011  
128'.37—dc22  
2011002230

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

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## PREFACE

This is a syncretistic work, blending the philosophical, the psychological, the biological, and the literary. You might call it “impure philosophy”—and the subject matter warrants the adjective. It is about the things we find repulsive: their essence and significance. I intend the book for a variety of readers, not just the narrowly philosophical—for the subject of disgust has wide relevance. I see the ideas presented as occupying the same territory as existentialism and psychoanalysis, and competing with them (though incorporating some of their insights): what might be called “hermeneutic psychology.” It aims to uncover disagreeable truths about what we are, as self-conscious emotional beings with organic bodies. But it tries to do so agreeably (Freud and Sartre were both great writers). The book can be construed as an essay in species self-criticism, and self-pity. It is a sort of lamentation.

I suppose I had been interested in the topic for a long time, in an unsystematic way—possibly since first reading Freud, some forty-odd years ago. But the immediate trigger for working seriously on it came a few years back, when I was scheduled to



teach a philosophy of mind seminar with Mark Rowlands in Miami. I found it difficult to face covering the same old material yet again, so I determined that we should include some sessions on emotion. This led me to think about the emotion of disgust, which struck me as interestingly puzzling. I read some texts, notably Aurel Kolnai's *On Disgust* and William Ian Miller's *The Anatomy of Disgust*: these got the juices flowing (so to speak) on the subject, since both are courageous and stimulating. I soon started having my own ideas, delving more deeply into the literature, and producing bits of writing. The result is the book now before you. It has been enjoyable to write, because of the literary challenges and opportunities, but also somewhat disconcerting. I have been compelled to concentrate for long periods on the disgusting, trying to get to the bottom of it—and this is not the usual human attitude (for reasons I discuss in the text). I am not sure it is good for a person to immerse himself so deeply in these filthy waters. The truth is not always welcome. You have been warned.

I would like to thank Mark Rowlands, Jane Casillo, Ronald de Sousa, and Carolyn Korsmeyer for very helpful comments.

Colin McGinn  
Miami  
November 2010

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## THE MEANING OF DISGUST

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## **PART ONE**

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### **THE ANALYSIS OF DISGUST**

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## The Aversive Emotions

DISGUST BELONGS IN THE area of human experience most protected by taboo and hedged with euphemism. It is a difficult thing for us to talk about, practically and theoretically. And there is good reason for that: there are problems of decorum for any detailed and frank investigation of the phenomena of disgust. The realm of the disgusting is by its nature repellent to us—not easily held in view. Dwelling on the topic can lead quickly to the emotion itself. Breaking our natural silence on what disgusts us can elicit alarm. The very question of what vocabulary to use is fraught: what words will be found offensive or ludicrous or unserious? I am well aware of the delicacy of the topic, and the precariousness of my position.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I shall try to avoid too much coy indirectness and tedious euphemism, but I will also try not to rub the reader's nose too crudely in the subject matter of this study. Laughter is the natural twin of offense, and I shall court that peril too. The subject, however, is of intense interest and significance; it is too good to be left

1. Perhaps I am being too cautious here—my readers may be less squeamish than I suppose (or than I am). There is certainly a big difference between hearing this kind of material spoken about in a class, in a public setting, and reading about it privately. In the former case, the words must be actually said out loud to an identifiable audience, while in the latter their reception is silent and distant. Still, I would not want my readers to think that I fail to recognize the sensitivity of the topic.

decently in the shadows. Moreover, a handful of excellent and intrepid studies have appeared over the years, which deserve to be better known, so I can claim my distinguished precedents for this venture into the vile and repulsive.<sup>2</sup>

The first task is to sketch out a map of the territory, assembling the data and enunciating some distinctive features. Detail and comprehensiveness will pay dividends here, preventing oversimplification and bringing the problematic of disgust vividly before our minds. The ultimate aim is to produce a theory of what unites the class of disgusting things: what all and only disgusting things have in common. This is basically a task of conceptual analysis, though not one that simply takes the word “disgust” and tries to peer into its meaning. Instead, I will survey the class of disgusting *things* and attempt to work out what brings them together in the emotion they provoke: what properties do disgusting things have that make them produce the emotion of disgust in us?<sup>3</sup> As a preliminary, it will be helpful to pin down the emotion we are to be concerned with more precisely, so as not to confuse it with other emotions—because disgust is a very specific kind of emotional reaction.

2. The works in question are Aurel Kolnai’s *On Disgust*, Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death*, Winfried Menninghaus’s *Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, and William Ian Miller’s *The Anatomy of Disgust*. I have learned from each of these works and will cite them frequently in what follows. Citations will be by author’s name and page or chapter reference.

3. I therefore reject the idea that the class of disgusting things is linked by nothing stronger than family resemblance. I am in general against the Wittgensteinian thesis that a concept may be constituted in this way, for the reasons given in my *Truth by Analysis*, chapter 2; I also recommend Bernard Suits’s *The Grasshopper* as an antidote to reflexive invocation of the family resemblance model. In any case, as a methodological precept, we should seek necessary and sufficient conditions first, abandoning that project only if we have to; and it will turn out that we can supply such conditions. Kolnai makes his goal that of “seeking to grasp the essence, the significance and the intention of disgust, and also what might be called the law of cohesion of its object-realm” (p. 30)—and this well describes my own aim. In other words: what do all disgusting things have in common in virtue of which they are disgusting?

I shall follow Aurel Kolnai's pioneering phenomenological study, *On Disgust*, in classifying disgust as an *aversive* emotion, belonging together with fear and hatred.<sup>4</sup> All three emotions may be felt toward the same object—as it might be, in response to a loathsome monster in the form of a bloody vampire or a rotting cannibalistic zombie. But these three emotions are by no means identical. Fear may be described as a prudential emotion, hatred as a moral emotion, and disgust as an aesthetic emotion. Fear is prudential in that it operates to protect the person (or animal) from danger: it is prudent to fear what is dangerous to health or life. The natural expression of fear is self-protection—against damage to the self by the feared object. Flight is the obvious prime mode of self-protection, but so is armor or weaponry or a raised hand. One can also fear things that will cause no bodily damage, as with adverse economic circumstances or revelations that might destroy one's reputation; here, proximity to the body is immaterial. Not all damage to the person results from contact with the body by the dangerous object. Indeed, if the tissues of the body could be suitably hardened at will, avoidance of contact with the feared object would not necessarily be sought. Physical escape is a contingent mark of fear, prompted by the vulnerability of the body. Avoidance of contact is an instrumental aspect of fear, not its essence (as we shall see, disgust differs here).

Hatred can be said to be a moral emotion in the sense that it is not rational to hate someone who has not wronged you, or who you do not judge to have wronged you.<sup>5</sup> When you hate someone, you do so because of what you think he or she has done to you, where this something is judged to be wrong. If you

4. See Kolnai, pp. 29–47; also the appendix: “The Standard Modes of Aversion: Fear, Disgust and Hatred.”

5. For a discussion of the belief component in hatred, see Robert C. Solomon, “Emotions and Choice,” in *Mind and Cognition*. Solomon treats hatred as a type of moral judgment.



hate someone for having done a certain thing to you, such as maliciously destroying your good name, and it turns out that that person did no such thing, then you are rationally obliged to cease hating him or her. You need not fear a person in order to hate him, since the time may have passed when he could harm you. You can retrospectively hate someone, but it makes no sense to fear in retrospect—to fear someone for what he or she did in the past. Fear is future-directed; hatred is directed to the past. But it will be rational for the hated individual to fear you, because hatred is also an aggressive emotion, in the sense that it incites those who harbor it to wish harm to those they hate (this is not necessarily true for fear). Fear is defensive; hatred is aggressive. Fear is directed toward the self and its integrity, and it contains no necessary suggestion of moral condemnation of its object. But hatred is directed toward the external object in itself, and must contain a negative evaluation of that object. Both emotions may be called “aversive,” but the aversion is of a quite different character in the two cases.<sup>6</sup>

Disgust, our main concern, is different again, though also aversive. Disgust is an aesthetic emotion in that its primary focus is the *appearance* of its object, not what that object can do or has done in the way of harm. You can be disgusted at something you neither fear nor hate—that you don’t think will do you any harm and don’t think has wronged you. Its natural expression is neither defensive nor aggressive; it is, rather, a response of *avoidance*. To be disgusted by something is, crucially, to want to avoid contact with it—either by sight

6. Note that fear is also evaluative in the sense that one has to regard harm to oneself as a bad thing, or else there will be no fear. Of course, that will generally be the case, but a person desiring his own death may well not fear what is about to cause it. There must be a normative element in fear, as also in disgust. In both cases, the aversion is backed by an evaluation; it is not merely brute. The evaluation may be instinctual and automatic, as with animal fear, but it is logically required.

or touch or smell or taste (but not, curiously, hearing<sup>7</sup>). However invulnerable you may feel with respect to a certain stench, and however blameless you take it (or its producer) to be, you still wish to escape its influence—to put distance between yourself and it. Putting your head in the sand is not, proverbially, a rational reaction to a feared object, but it is a perfectly sensible way to escape a disgusting stimulus (in fact, to do so in the face of fear just is to confuse fear with disgust). Disgust has everything to do with the condition of the senses and what they are delivering to consciousness, but that is not what fear and hatred are all about. You might, of course, fear that something will disgust you, since the feeling of disgust is, or can be, a kind of harm (the psychological kind); but disgust itself is not the same as fear, precisely because the disgusting stimulus need do you no further harm than that of merely eliciting disgust in you (by contrast, the feared object can cause more harm to you than merely causing the emotion of fear—if it did only that, you wouldn't feel *fear* at all). There is no contradiction in the idea that a deeply disgusting stimulus might be utterly harmless and judged by the subject to be so (I will be discussing examples shortly).<sup>8</sup>

7. Kolnai discusses hearing and disgust, pp. 48–49, suggesting that the reason for the absence of auditory disgust is that hearing does not “present” its objects as the other senses do—it merely provides signs of their presence. Since hearing lacks “substantial intentionality,” it provides no immediate contact with the source of the sound. He notes the existence of sugary or sentimental music, but rightly observes that this is a matter of associations and a judgment of bad taste: “One would search in vain for any even approximately equivalent parallel in the aural sphere to something like a putrid smell, the feel of a flabby body, or of a belly ripped open” (p. 49).

8. Disgust is an inherently *unpleasant* emotion, so it is reasonable to fear experiencing it; but it is less clear that fear and hatred are constitutionally unpleasant in that way. Hatred is certainly not always experienced as unpleasant, and fear can occur in forms that are not clearly unpleasant, as with scary fairground rides. Disgust is unpleasant in somewhat the way pain is, without itself being pain, but hatred and fear are remote from pain as subjective states.

Kolnai expresses the contrast in traditional phenomenological terms, as that between *Dasein* and *Sosein*: between “being” and “so-being.” Fear is directed toward its object as an existent thing, for only an existent thing can be really dangerous; so it is internal to fear that it presupposes that the feared object exists (whether or not it really does). Much the same can be said of hatred, for only an existent thing can wrong you. But disgust is directed more at “so-being”—that is, the phenomenal qualities possessed by the (intentional) object. The reality of an object is essential to its fearsomeness or its hatefulness, while the sensory appearance of the object is neither here nor there; but in the case of disgust the appearance takes up the foreground of the emotion, with existence relegated to a secondary status. It is how the object sensibly *seems* that is critical to its disgusting character, not how it might be in itself—even what it might do in the way of harm. We can state this intuitive contrast in a rather straightforward manner: fear and hatred presuppose the existence of their object (i.e., the subject of the emotion must believe the object to exist), but it is possible to be disgusted by an object in whose existence one does *not* believe. That is to say, you could believe yourself to be merely hallucinating a disgusting object and still be disgusted by it. Why? Because the sensory appearance could be the same whether or not the object exists. Suppose you become convinced that you are a brain in a vat (whether or not you really are): the range of your experience would still produce the same disgusting sights, tastes, and smells that it did before you became thus convinced. The *Sosein* would remain constant, though the (believed) *Dasein* has changed. You would no longer fear or hate those (believed) illusions, since no harm can come from mere illusions, but they would retain their power to repel. It is the same with beauty: an object does not cease to strike you as beautiful just because you believe it to be an illusion (think of an hallucinogenic drug that produced beautiful visions). Aesthetic emotions are geared to

appearance and therefore don't require that the object actually exists.<sup>9</sup> Disgust is an "existence-independent" emotion, while fear and hatred are "existence-dependent" (with respect to the subject's beliefs). Macbeth can be disgusted by his bloody dagger, while all the while thinking it to be a mere figment of his imagination, but he cannot fear or hate Macduff while at the same time rejecting his reality.

This dependence on appearance in the case of disgust reveals itself in another contrast with the other two aversive emotions. An object can seem fearful and not be fearful or can be fearful and not seem fearful; and similarly for hatefulness, since there can be errors as to who has wronged you. Being dangerous or blameworthy is an objective property about which the appearances might be misleading. But it surely cannot be the case that an object can seem disgusting and not be, and be disgusting and not seem so; here, the reality and the appearance converge. To *be* disgusting is to *seem* so. It would be wholly bizarre to maintain that the range of things typically found disgusting by human beings are not really disgusting (to them), while some other class of objects found to be quite agreeable are in fact disgusting (to them). Yet these are logical possibilities for fear and hatred (despite the massiveness of the error that would have to be involved). To claim that feces are *really* non-disgusting for human beings, while diamonds are disgusting, is a preposterous proposition; skepticism cannot reach that far. But it is not conceptually outrageous to suppose that we are systematically mistaken about what is really dangerous to us or who has wronged us. This is simply because disgust concerns *Sosein*,

9. This is the Kantian doctrine that aesthetic experience is more or less indifferent to the actual existence of its object, being focused more on the qualities presented. If an artist could reliably generate merely intentional objects for your contemplation, and you knew their negative existential status, you could still experience aesthetic emotions in regard to them. The artist might merely stimulate your brain with electrodes to produce a virtual painting in your visual consciousness.

while fear and hatred concern *Dasein*—disgust is essentially appearance-sensitive.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that the proper objects of disgust are *experiences* and not external objects. Indeed, that would be a category-mistake and quite false: as I shall explain later, psychological items such as experiences cannot be objects of disgust at all, still less be the familiar objects by which we take ourselves to be disgusted. The point is rather that the disgusting aspects of objects belong to their sensory appearance, not to what might lie behind that appearance—while this is not true for feared and hated objects. It is the “mode of presentation” of an object that provokes disgust, but the reference itself is what is feared or hated, no matter how it presents itself. We are repelled by feces qua a specific *Sosein*: but lions are scary in their *Dasein*, no matter how they may perceptually strike you. This is why no one needs to *tell* us to be disgusted by feces, but advice as to the dangers of lions can be very useful. Appearances are decisive in the one case, but possibly deceptive in the other. It is what something objectively *does* that makes it an object of fear or hatred; it is how something subjectively *seems* that makes it an object of disgust.

A final preliminary point: the primary focus of disgust is proximity, contact—we seek to avoid being close to what disgusts us. More specifically, perception of such closeness is what controls the emotion. Our aversion is primarily to the invasion of the disgusting object into our consciousness, mediated by the body. So we can say that our aversive concern is with our state of mind in the first instance: we want, in short, to avoid certain states of consciousness. This is not so

10. In fact, we can say that it is the sensory *appearance* of feces that is disgusting, not feces themselves, because not everything about feces is disgusting (say, the atomic structure of the constituent molecules), but it would be wrong to say that it is the appearance of things that is fearful or hateful (as a general rule anyway). This is why something with the appearance of feces that is not in fact feces will provoke the disgust reaction.

for fear and hatred, where the aversion concerns more bodily matters: we avoid the object that is actually dangerous to the body. Physical harm is not the aversive stimulus where disgust is concerned; we are not (necessarily) concerned that the disgusting object will harm our body—and if it might, fear is the appropriate response. What we seek to avoid is a penetration of consciousness itself—we shun certain experiences. Thus, it makes sense to hold one’s nose in the presence of a loathsome odor, but it makes no sense to do so in the presence of a looming fist. We fear the broken nose (and hate the nose breaker), but we are disgusted at the smell as it invades olfactory consciousness. In this sense, disgust is consciousness-centered, not body-centered.<sup>11</sup> A person deprived of all forms of sensory experience would be spared the emotion of disgust, but he might have as much to fear and hate as the next man. We are disgustedly averse to external objects only *in as much* as they affect our perceptual consciousness in a certain noxious way. We thus seek to avoid the *kind* of contact with the object that will lead to this unwelcome invasion of consciousness. When disgusted by a smell, we seek to move away from the proximate source of the smell, or otherwise block the contact it is imposing on us in order to preserve our disgust-free state of consciousness; we sever the perceptual contact precisely in order to keep consciousness “clean.” This is a very different matter from the kind of project we undertake when confronted by a fearful or hateful object; here, our focus is more outer-directed, externally anchored.

11. So the intention of disgust is reflexive in a way: in disgust, consciousness seeks to avoid a state of itself—namely, perception of the eliciting stimulus. When we endure a bad smell, say, our urge is to change a conscious state of ourselves. By contrast, in fear we do not self-reflexively seek to eliminate fear itself or the mental states that cause it. Fundamentally, disgust incites us to remove the state of disgust itself (as pain incites us to remove the pain itself). No doubt this is connected to the intrinsic unpleasantness of disgust.

In sum: disgust is a *sui generis* aversive emotion, importantly different from its aversive cousins. And this uniqueness is what makes it peculiarly problematic philosophically. The question, simply put, is this: Why should we be so averse to what is actually not intrinsically harmful to us? Disgust identifies its objects independently of their harmfulness, irrespective of it; so to what other trait of objects is it responsive? In virtue of *what* do we find disgusting things disgusting? What does the aversive character of the disgusting object consist in, if not in its potential for harm? We are naturally averse to what might harm us or has wronged us, but what has the disgusting object done to us that could provoke our extreme aversive response to it?<sup>12</sup> What is disgust's *raison d'être*? What does disgust *mean*? What is its pith and point?

12. One further difference should be noted: fear and hatred are purely and wholly aversive emotions, but disgust can have an attractive component (as I shall explain later)—there can be ambivalence to it. Disgust has a more complex “tonality” than fear and hatred. In addition, disgust can be described as a *sensation* more naturally than fear and hatred can: it is a way of sensing an object, while fear and hatred could not be so characterized. Disgust has a foot in both the perceptual and the affective.

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## The Elicitors of Disgust

TO BEGIN TO ANSWER our question, to resolve the puzzle of disgust, we must look at the class of stimuli that elicit disgust. I shall proceed by listing a number of categories of disgusting phenomena, accompanied by a pairing with relevant non-disgusting entities.<sup>1</sup> The list provides the data for any plausible theory of the disgusting, and what is striking is how heterogeneous the class is. This heterogeneity poses a problem for the most initially attractive theories, forcing a subtler and more elaborate account of the disgusting, which will finally emerge. The goal is to find a theory that unifies the varieties of disgust.

(1) Presumably the paradigm of the disgusting object is the rotting corpse, human or animal (but especially human). Not so much—or at all—the fresh corpse of the very recently deceased, but the corpse as it undergoes the process of putrefaction or decay: the changes in the texture, color, and smell of the flesh as the forces of decomposition impose their gruesome transformation

1. See also the lists compiled by Kolnai, pp. 52–72, and Miller, chap. 5. Their lists and mine are quite similar, despite some differences of emphasis, with one exception: they include the profligate, swarming nature of living things, especially insects. I don't find this very intuitive, because it seems to me that the totality inherits its disgustingness from its members; in the case of herds of cattle or flocks of birds I don't detect a disgust response. Nor do I find an increase of disgust when I see or contemplate large human populations. So I don't see profligate life as disgusting as such. If you do, then by all means add this category to the list.



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