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Comment: Scholarly Disgust and Related Mysteries

Joshua Rottman

Department of Psychology, Boston University, USA

Liane Young

Department of Psychology, Boston College, USA

Abstract

Strohminger (2014) is revolted by McGinn's (2011) book, *The Meaning of Disgust*. We argue that her reaction of repugnance highlights one of the greatest mysteries in the psychology of disgust: this emotion is at times elicited by abstract ideological concerns rather than physical threats of infection or

contamination. Here we describe the theoretical challenge of accounting for nonpathogenic disgust elicitors, which include spiritual defilement, violations of the "natural order," and, apparently, McGinn's latest publication.

Keywords

disgust, emotion, morality

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Corresponding author: Joshua Rottman, Department of Psychology, Boston University, 64 Cummington Mall, Boston, MA, 02215, USA. *Email:* rottman@bu.edu

Strohminger (2014) is revolted by McGinn's (2011) book, *The Meaning of Disgust*. Her commentary leads us to believe that she read his book with a wrinkled nose and flashes of nausea. But McGinn's book posed no threat of infection, and flipping through its pages presumably left no foul odors in the air.

Strohminger's (2014) commentary is unforgiving, especially in its attack of McGinn's supposedly "mysterian" attitude toward disgust. To counter his view that disgust is a befuddling phenomenon, she points to the orthodox belief that disgust evolved as a mechanism for pathogen avoidance. This idea has been embraced by evolutionary theorists (e.g., Curtis & Biran, 2001; Oaten, Stevenson, & Case, 2009; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2008; Schaller, 2011) and is generally unquestioned. Yet, it is not clear to us that disgust has such a simple adaptive explanation (Rottman, in press).

Disgust, as McGinn (2011) notes, is a complex phenomenon associated with numerous elicitors that vary widely across time and space. People around the world experience disgust in response not only to pathogenic substances like feces and rotting flesh but also to norm violations and sacrilegious actions that are unrelated to infectious disease. Although some researchers have argued that disgusting moral transgressions tend to be indicative of potential bodily contamination (Inbar & Pizarro, in press), others posit a much broader array of sociomoral violations that are generally unrelated to pathogens or parasites (Chapman & Anderson, 2013). For example, disgust is evoked by unfair actions as well as ideational or spiritual—rather than bodily—impurities (e.g., Cannon, Schnall, & White, 2011). In our own research, we have found that people judge suicide to be immoral and disgusting to the extent that they believe suicide taints the purity of the soul (Rottman, Kelemen, & Young, 2014). Also on the list of nonbodily disgust elicitors are hypocrisy, various forms of social deviance, environmental degradation, the sacred texts of other religions, and being French-Canadian, to name a few (e.g., Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997; Hodson & Costello, 2007; Ritter & Preston, 2011).

It is difficult to imagine how such nonbodily disgust elicitors can be accommodated by an adaptive account narrowly focused on the avoidance of pathogens; disgust, it seems, would be better conceptualized as a response not only to bodily violations (Bloom, 2004; Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013) but also to tarnished souls. On several accounts, it is proposed that disgust has been exapted or culturally extended from its initial manifestation as a food rejection response (Kelly, 2011; Rozin, Haidt, & Fincher, 2009; Rozin et al., 2008). However, there are currently no strong reasons—either a priori or empirical—to assume this historical trajectory for disgust or even to accept that disgust is a unitary adaptation rather than comprising multiple distinct functional systems (Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, & DeScioli,

2013). Scholars must account for the apparent human uniqueness of this emotion and rule out the possibility that it evolved as a mechanism for social regulation independent of disease avoidance.

Ultimately, we share McGinn's caricatured puzzlement and agree that a coherent understanding of disgust remains enigmatic. However, we are excited about the upsurge of research that is starting to shine a light on the dank underbelly of disgust. It is likely that this emotion will not remain mysterious for long.

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