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The Meaning of Disgust: A Refutation

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Abstract

Recently, McGinn (2011) has proposed a new theory of disgust. This theory makes empirical claims as to the history and function of disgust, yet does not take into account contemporary scientific research on the subject. This essay evaluates his theory for its merits as an account of disgust, and as a piece of scholarship more generally, and finds it lacking.

Keywords

disgust

In disgust research, there is shit, and then there is bullshit. McGinn's (2011) theory belongs to the latter category.

McGinn is best known for his work in philosophy of mind, where he is a proponent of the view that consciousness is too difficult a problem for the human mind to solve (1989). This is not so much a theory as a question mark, which is why it has been branded (somewhat tauntingly) mysterianism (Flanagan, 1991).

While the hard problem of consciousness can bring out the mysterian in even the best of us, disgust puts up no special barriers to empirical inquiry. Yet McGinn's (2011) view of disgust is insistently mysterian: not merely ignorant or unenlightening but obfuscatory. Baroque, eye-catching explanations are given precedence over parsimony, evidence, or even common sense.

Before continuing, I think it necessary to give a capsule summary of the most widely accepted theory of disgust today. It is necessary, in part, because, in his 200-odd page treatment of the subject, McGinn (2011) never mentions it. Disgust is an emotion whose principal function is to help us avoid contaminants and disease—a kind of behavioral extension of the immune system (Curtis, De Barra, & Aunger, 2011; Oaten, Stevenson, & Case, 2009; Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Schaller & Park, 2011). This explains the range of objects we find disgusting: human waste and other effluvium, animal by-products, rotting or unfamiliar food, creatures that are typically vectors of disease (like rats and flies), and anything exhibiting signs of infectiousness, such as being greasy, sticky, discolored, or malodorous. In this context, disgust can be seen as but one possible way of dealing with the universal problem of pathogens, which other animals combat by

grooming, wound licking, and food learning mechanisms, among others (Garcia, Kimeldorf, & Koelling, 1955; Hart, 1990).

We are not given a review, much less a critique, of this idea in McGinn's (2011) account. He discusses a few dated theories (Darwin's [1872/2002] taste-toxicity theory, Becker's [1973] theory that disgust is a response to death) before landing on what he calls the death-in-life theory, based largely on Aurel Kolnai's (1929/2004) work. "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" (p. 90). Thus, a young person or a skeleton do not disgust us terribly much (symbolizing, as they do, only life or death), but the sight of a rotting corpse does. Similarly, feces are disgusting because they are a reminder of the previously living organic matter that needed to be sacrificed in order for our own lives to continue.

McGinn (2011) calls disgust a philosophical emotion, since it reflects, at base, our existential terror and ambivalence about being souls tied to mortal bodies. One may well ask what the function of such an emotion could be, whose essential feature is allowing us to be riveted by the specter of our own deaths. To answer this question, McGinn argues that humans, being of unlimited desires, need an emotion to rein them in. (Animals lack disgust because they are "more sensible, finite, and practical" [p. 129] in their appetites; after all, "what animal wants to become a billionaire, or a rock star?" [p. 131].) Specifically, the desires of our caveman ancestors became so rapacious that "early humans started desiring sex with dead bodies and wanting to eat feces" (p. 127). Rather than seeing necrophilia and

coprophagia as dysfunctional because they expose the would-be sybarite to pathogens, McGinn suggests that these activities could be problematic because they are not “conducive to psychological wellbeing” (p. 128).

At times, McGinn (2011) seems aware of the improbability (or “boldness”) of his claims. He assures us that he puts this theory forward only because “I know of no other theory of the origin and function of disgust that seems to me even remotely plausible” (p. 131). In a monograph with all of 14 citations, only one of them written by a scientist active in the last century (Paul Rozin), it’s little wonder that McGinn is so flummoxed.

McGinn’s (2011) theory does not merely bypass the received wisdom amongst empirically minded scholars of disgust; it bypasses the received wisdom amongst moms and schoolmarms about basic hygiene. Our revulsion at corpses, feces, and open wounds is genuinely puzzling to him: “Why should we be so averse to what is actually not intrinsically harmful to us?” (p. 12). Is this a joke? Is McGinn really this obtuse, or is he overstating the mystery in order to make his theory seem more profound? It is impossible to tell.

Another property of McGinn’s (2011) text, of which potential readers should be aware, is its unintentional hilarity. The humor derives less from the unblushing content than from the unblushing purpleness of his prose. Of the male genitalia, he writes: “Life and death coexist in complex and subtle ways in the penis and testicles, telling a story of triumph and tragedy” (p. 111). On feces: “I have no wish to romanticize the turd” (p. 102). Pubic hair is referred to as “nature’s furry bounty” (p. 22). Semen is a “pointless sticky daub once it is spilled on the ground, only to be consumed there by unfussy insects or whatever” (p. 103). Or whatever. Unfussy cavemen, perhaps.

In pursuit of a grand unifying theory, Freud saw phalluses everywhere; McGinn (2011) sees only crap. Snakes, being dun-colored and slithery, are deemed unmistakably poop-like. The brain “resembles nothing so much as a mound of dung” (p. 141), a proclamation that forces us to ask whether McGinn has ever actually seen a brain. “The rectum is a grave [obviously!]... but is the grave also a rectum, with corpses featuring as large turds?” (p. 101). These are the questions McGinn is not afraid to ask, not that the answers could be anything other than nonsense.

McGinn (2011) wields his death-in-life theory to explain sexual practices, the result of which is yet more absurdity. We learn that “the appeal of homosexuality is apparent, from a certain point of view ... so a taboo is essential to keep people centered on the penis–vagina variety of sex” (p. 120). One wonders at the mind that finds such a thought intuitive.

Sex (that is, penis–vagina sex) is characterized thusly: “a tumor and a wound are violently combined in a vital act to produce a fresh life, itself redolent of death” (p. 112). (He assures us, though, that sex is nonetheless “entirely enjoyable. In combining those opposite extremes lies its peculiar charm” [p. 112]. Phew.)

McGinn (2011) sees both aesthetic pleasure and modern consumerism as being rooted in a flight from disgust, and solace

in the inorganic. But not all fetishized commodities are shiny gadgets and sparkly gems; plenty of leisure capital is also frittered away on furs, flowers, purebreds, prostitutes, and art depicting these objects. The organic/inorganic distinction appears to add no predictive power to whether we will fetishize a consumer product or not.

He also suggests that inorganic items—a list which includes cars, houses, and, apparently, fine silks—lack the ambivalence of human companions, so we can love them wholeheartedly, unencumbered by the physical disgust that attends our love for children and romantic partners. Diamonds, being forever, do not remind us of death. He muses: “Is this why women tend to love jewelry so—because of a relatively high level of bodily self-disgust? Just asking” (p. 186). Is McGinn a sexist, penis-gazing blowhard? Just asking!

McGinn is not optimistic that disgust could play a favorable role in aesthetics: “the anus has still not found its Picasso or Matisse. There is just no market for it” (p. 199). But is that really true? The Boschs and Goyas of the world (much less the Hirsts or the Savilles) are dismissed as being successful only insofar as they distance themselves from disgust, or transform it. It remains to be seen, though, whether the disgust we feel while viewing a gory zombie movie or bovine formaldehyde slice is not a direct contributor to our enjoyment of it, any less than genuine sadness contributes to our enjoyment of Barber’s *Adagio*.

Perhaps *The Meaning of Disgust* is useful as an aesthetic object in itself: an emblem of that most modern creation, the pop philosophy book. Actual content, thought, or insight is entirely optional. The only real requirement is that the pages stroke the reader’s ego, make him feel he is doing something highbrow for once, something to better himself. The sad fact is the reader would learn more about disgust by reading *Mad* magazine.

For the rest of us—those who actually care about disgust, or emotions, or scholarship at all—his treatise is bound to disappoint. “Who can deny the mood-destroying effect of an errant *flatus* just at the moment of erotic fervor?” (p. 194) he writes. McGinn’s theory is just such a *flatus*, threatening to spoil an exciting intellectual moment for the rest of us. Sometimes with ideas, as with farts, it’s better to just hold it in.

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