

## DISGUST

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It. *Disgusto*; Deut. *Ekel*; Es. *Asco*; Fr. *Dégoût*. The concept of disgust refers to an emotional reaction of revulsion and strong disapproval elicited by something perceived as repellent or offensive, which is to be distanced and avoided. Disgust arises in many domains of human existence that can be traced back to two main spheres: the physical and the moral. As a matter of example, food, body products, corpses, intimate contact, etc., are to be counted among the physical objects that elicit disgust, whereas moral objects of disgust might be moral violations in human behaviour such as abuse, betrayal, hypocrisy, corruption, and the like. The function of disgust is to protect the subject who feels it from contamination. Disgust should not be confused either with distaste, as disgust is a deeper and stronger feeling of rejection, or with contempt, since disgust does not refer immediately to the intrinsic value of the concerned object. Disgust is mostly addressed by Philosophy of emotions, Aesthetics, and Political philosophy.

### PHILOSOPHY OF EMOTIONS

As a branch of Ontology, Philosophy of emotions wonders what disgust is, what it is for and to what extent propositions on disgust are valid. According to empirical researches, disgust seems to be a universal emotion among human beings (Ekman, Friesen 1976). By comparing facial expressions and their recognition, evidence has been found that at least the six basic emotions (that is, anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise) are expressed and recognised in similar ways in different parts of the world (Ekman 1972). This is a strong argument for claiming that an objective description of disgust is possible. Indeed there is general agreement with respect to the fact that disgust is facially exhibited by gaping the mouth, protruded lips, and even spitting; in its strongest instances the facial mimicry of the disgusted person is the same as in vomiting, which can actually occur; shutters and guttural sounds accompany it (Darwin 1872). Scientists stress the fact that such an experience presupposes beliefs to a certain degree (Rozin, Fallon 1987). Phenomenologists and philosophers of mind state that disgust is an intentional

experience, that is, the form of directly being aware of disgusting objects (Kolnai 1929; Korsmeyer 2011; McGinn 2011).

Scholars also agree on the fact that disgust is a form of aversion, which arises in order to defend the subject who is experiencing disgust, and that such a disinclination is qualified by a feeling of revulsion. However, it is controversial to establish whether the latter is the sole *quale* of disgust or whether it also involves a form of attraction and pleasure. The great divide is between those who think that disgust needs evolution and enculturation in order to develop (Freud 1910; Jones 1912; Menninghaus 1999; Kelly 2011) and those who believe that disgust is a phenomenological and metaphysical fact (Kolnai 1929; Sartre 1938; 1943). Those who adhere to the first opinion generally defend the idea that revulsion is due to an original attraction chiefly forbidden by education; those who agree with the second opinion observe that attraction and revulsion are essential and concurrent moments of the experience of disgust.

Another issue is what disgust defends one from. This has immediate implications in the origin of disgust. There are three main positions in the debate, respectively emphasising one of the following aspects of the experience of disgust: the character of rejection, a certain sense of offensiveness and contamination concealed in the relevant object, a sort of prohibition of contact entailed in feeling disgust. Rozin and Fallon (1987) defend the idea that disgust is rooted in food rejection, in particular they state that animals and their products, considered as potential food, primarily elicit disgust because of cultural beliefs. In this framework disgust results from evolutionary forces which shaped an older food rejection system based on distaste in order to preserve the difference between human beings and animals and forget their common origin. Others find that disgust serves to avoid the contact or ingestion either of harmful or dangerous object or more specifically of pathogens and parasites (Curtis, Biran 2001) which are indeed concealed in all disgusting objects. From this point of view disgust would have genuinely biological reasons: it contributes to preserve the healthy condition of the human being. A third perspective on disgust's function and origin stresses the sense of prohibition that one experiences by feeling it. Disgust seems to preserve humans from "losing" themselves either as such (Kolnai 1929; Sartre 1943; S. Miller 2004), or as social and civilised beings (Freud 1910; A. Miller 1997; Menninghaus 1999), as if the disgusting object could damage what is (metaphysically or culturally) supposed to be most precious to the human being.

Disgust's elicitors can be foods, other beings (bodies, insects, animals), bad sensory properties (smell, secretions and products like faeces), corpses and decay, and moral behaviour. Despite a general accord upon those categories, it is debated which of these categories is the core disgust's elicitor. According to Rozin and Fallon (1987) the latter is 'animalness'. Instead Kolnai (1929), Sartre (1938), and McGinn (2011) claim that it is decay, whereas Angyal (1941) affirms that it is body products. Finally, Freud (1910) and Menninghaus (1999) defend a both cultural and psychological origin of disgust, as its core objects are a matter of taboo and of repression of libidinal impulses.

## AESTHETICS

Disgust entered the philosophical debate as a concept of Aesthetics (Franzini 2000). After 1970 (Clair 2004), it became one of the most interesting and controversial fields of contemporary Aesthetics with particular reference to contemporary art. According to many, disgust and disgusting elicitors not only break down the boundaries of representation in the fine arts, but also subvert the laws of beauty and taste established by classic Aesthetics (Menninghaus 1999; Perniola 1998), and above all dissolve the idea itself of form in the arts (Derrida 1975; Franzini 2000; Mazzocut-Mis 2009). This has made it impossible for the spectator to contemplate an artwork as a simple show, i.e. without being viscerally involved in what is represented in the latter. This situation sheds new light on the above discussed issue concerning the constituents of disgust: whether just revulsion, or revulsion + attraction. Indeed Korsmeyer (2011) and McGinn (2011) claim that disgust can elicit pleasure while offending our senses. However, Talon-Hugon (2003) had already argued that this is not always true: accordingly, she claimed that the more realistic a form of art is, the more it elicits mere disgust making any pleasure impossible and producing an actual divorce between the aesthetic attitude and the artwork itself.

Aesthetic analyses of disgust have also brought to interesting insights concerning contemporary social and political life. According to Clair, who proposes a severe diagnosis of the cultural hegemony of disgust in art, art is nowadays complicit with the present oppressive late-capitalist society; explicitly against him, Danto (2000) finds that we are living in the era of meaning, where each form of art has its proper legitimacy because of its inner significance. From a completely different point of view, Sianne Ngai (2005) argues that disgust is what signals the limits of the apparent tolerance of such society and the curtailed agency of every art within it.

## POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the strong moral implications always recognized to such emotion (i.e., Kolnai 1929) have been revealed as strictly political. Many have focused on the usage of disgust in order to create unjust hierarchies (A. Miller 1997), and discriminate (Nussbaum 2010). Others have insisted on the fact that disgust crucially helps in guiding societies (Devlin 1965; Kahan 1999), particularly for their legal regulation. The former wish to eliminate disgust from society, or at least to weaken it; the latter to strengthen it.

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