

An Examination of Disgust and Its Relation to Morality

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Abstract: In his book *Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*, Daniel Kelly synthesizes a growing body of research on disgust and briefly explores the philosophical role of the emotion. This paper presents arguments for the position that disgust should not be considered a source of moral knowledge, a position that Kelly suggests but fails to illustrate. The paper also explores implications of this view, specifically concerning the ways we should seek to manipulate our disgust reactions in order to improve moral reasoning.

DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF DISGUST

The role of disgust in moral reasoning is a controversial one. Can our experience of disgust ever justify moral condemnation of a person or action? This is a complex question, which I will attempt to answer here by developing a working definition of disgust and then examining potential connections between disgust and morality. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that disgust should not only not influence our moral decision-making but should be severely limited in its scope in order to prevent its unintentional intrusion into these decision-making processes.

Before I begin to argue this, it is important to precisely define the somewhat ambiguous concept of disgust. Disgust reactions, which are characterized by feelings of revulsion and nausea accompanied by a specific facial expression, have a variety of triggers. Daniel Kelly, in his book *Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*, places our most basic disgust reactions into two groups: those related to the avoidance of contaminated food and those related to “disease and parasite avoidance.”¹ Triggers of disgust can be things that actually

¹ Daniel R. Kelly, *Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 46-48.



cause harm, such as fecal material, or something resembling those triggers. The disgust response is prone to false positives, i.e. disgust at something that is harmless but resembles a common disgust trigger, such as fudge shaped like feces. False negatives, i.e. failing to find something disgusting that would disgust most people, are far less common.² Though Kelly does not make this observation, both of these reactions are united in their common relationship to the potential of physical harm to ourselves or others, an understanding that does much to simplify discussions of disgust reactions. One might object to this simplification on the basis that not all harms cause disgust. A murderer approaching us, for example, does not disgust us. However, potential physical harms only fail to disgust us in cases where fear motivates action and a disgust response is not necessary. In other words, in cases where the potential for physical harm does not repulse us, it is because our innate fight-or-flight response causes a response more appropriate to those specific dangers.

Disgust has several important characteristics that are relevant to Kelly's and my arguments. First, although core disgust (the type of disgust triggered by physical harms that was previously discussed) is most common, disgust can take another form. *Ideas* can trigger disgust independent of the suggestion of any negative physical consequences; this non-core disgust often relates to ideas of something being morally impure or spiritually harmful. The second significant characteristic of disgust is its transferability; as Kelly explains it, "infected substances . . . can be contagious and thus pass on their infection." This transfer is often physical. When one disgusting thing comes into physical contact with another object, that object becomes disgusting.³ However, this relationship is not necessarily physical. Throughout evolutionary history, disgust motivated by a lack of physical cleanliness morphed into disgust at a lack of moral or spiritual cleanliness.⁴

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DISGUST AND MORAL DECISION-MAKING

Kelly does not explain the importance of his examination. However, the implications of disgust-motivated moral reasoning are profound. When disgust precedes or follows moral decision-making,

² *Ibid.*, 51.

³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

moral condemnation and even hostility towards the source of that disgust often result. One easy example of this is disgust at homosexuality. Many people find themselves disgusted by the idea of a homosexual relationship, label such relationships morally wrong as a result, and subsequently find homosexuality even more disgusting because they believe it is immoral. A great deal of hostility towards homosexual individuals results from such disgust. However, if this disgust is unfounded, so, too, is this accompanying hostility. Therefore, we must examine the relationship between disgust and moral decision-making and question whether this connection is well-founded.

I hope to question these relationships in light of the following categories into which they might be placed:

1. Pre-disgust: A person finds a practice disgusting and, on that basis, labels it morally wrong.
2. Post-disgust: A person believes something is morally wrong and, therefore, finds it disgusting.

Again, the validity of these connections must be questioned because of their powerful consequences. For clarity, we will begin by examining pre-disgust, then move to post-disgust.

Near the end of *Yuck!*, Kelly criticizes what I label pre-disgust by presenting and then criticizing the "Deep Wisdom Argument," which states that disgust is an indicator of what is "natural" and thereby conveys moral knowledge.⁵ Kelly rebuts this view by stating that disgust is evolved and has varied triggers; it is fundamentally about avoiding contaminants, not revealing "unnaturalness." Thus, he concludes at the end of his book that we should maintain skepticism about disgust's ability to indicate moral truths.⁶

This conclusion is certainly reasonable, but it is insufficient. Ultimately, it is important to move beyond Kelly's singular argument. We should prove not just that pre-disgust should be regarded with some suspicion but that we should reject pre-disgust entirely. A defense of this position can be achieved by considering the three ways in which pre-disgust can be realized. Disgust reactions and reasoned moral decisions can fall in opposition, concur but be made for different reasons, or concur and be made for the same reasons. Ultimately, we

⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁶ Ibid., 147.



will realize that disgust reactions should be entirely separated from moral decision-making.

First, there are many cases wherein reasoned moral judgments directly contradict our disgust reactions. One example is presented in psychologist Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind* as he describes his dissertation research, which involved asking people about the violation of social norms in "disgust[ing] or disrespect[ful]" ways.⁷ One story employed in Haidt's study was that of a man who, unbeknownst to anyone else, "has sexual intercourse with [a dead chicken]. . . . Then he cooks it and eats it." Though most subjects agreed that the man did not hurt anyone with his actions, many could not move past their initial disgust reactions and proceeded to morally condemn the man. When questioned by the interviewer about the validity of their judgments, these people maintained that, even though they did not know why, the man's actions were morally wrong.⁸ These are cases wherein disgust reactions are inconsistent with the reasoned moral positions that could be reached via a utilitarian (maximizing happiness) or rights-based approach, outside of concerns about the violation of animals rights/harm to animals inherent in purchasing a presumably factory-farmed chicken. Given the consequences of unreasonable moral condemnation, we should seek to avoid faulty moral decision-making whenever possible. In scenarios such as this one where disgust-motivated judgments directly contradict moral reasoning, disgust circumvents that aim.

In contrast, there are some cases wherein disgust reactions are consistent with reasoned moral judgments condemning an action. However, even in many of those cases, those moral judgments are not made for the same reason we are disgusted. One example was presented by Brian Besong in his talk "Being Appropriately Disgusted," where he presented a thought experiment wherein a man throws a urine-filled water balloon at his wife.⁹ Although this scenario is obviously disgusting and the man's actions are clearly wrong from a rights-

⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ Brian Besong, "Being Appropriately Disgusted" (presentation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Daniel N. Boone Speaker Series, Indiana, PA, October 24, 2013).

based perspective, the disgust response and moral judgment concur. However, the reasons we label the man's actions morally wrong are different from the reason we feel repulsed. We feel repulsed because urine is a contaminant and therefore disgusts us; we judge the man's actions morally wrong because his act violates the woman's rights. Tellingly, even if the woman consented to have the urine-filled balloon thrown at her (something the rights-based perspective would maintain she has a right to do, even if it harms her), we would still be disgusted by this scenario but would not label it morally wrong. This example demonstrates the greater point that, in many cases, disgust-induced moral leanings run contrary to reasoned moral positions.

The only clear examples of cases in which disgust is really consistent with reasoned moral positions are cases where the fact that something is harmful both causes us disgust and motivates us to label it morally wrong. We can use the example of the urine-filled balloon presented above to provide an example of this phenomenon. From a utilitarian perspective, we both view the man's actions as disgusting and label the man's actions morally wrong because they might cause the woman harm and because they disgust her. Although this concurrence of our disgust reactions and one potential moral position might provide a somewhat compelling case for at least some insertion of core disgust into moral reasoning—in other words, for pre-disgust—the conclusions we would reach if the disgust response were absent would be the same as the conclusion we reach via the disgust reaction. Thus, in no case is the pre-disgust reaction necessary or even significantly helpful in reaching appropriate conclusions about the morality of an action.

What about post-disgust, which follows a moral decision? Obviously, it is unwarranted to be disgusted after making an unfounded decision that something is immoral. But what about disgust at people who behave immorally or things that truly are immoral, such as child abuse? This form of disgust may be more justified than disgust at things that are not immoral, like homosexuality, but all post-disgust reactions are nevertheless dangerous. Even this kind of disgust clouds our thinking, preventing a process of continual moral questioning. Additionally, as we've seen, disgust is incredibly transferrable. This makes any insertion of disgust into moral decision-making processes somewhat dangerous because it simply moves that disgust closer to the beginning of moral reasoning—in other words, closer to motivating someone to make a moral judgment that may be unfounded. Thus,



as this examination has demonstrated, we should strive to separate disgust from processes of moral reasoning.

There are some easy ways to begin to achieve this goal. One is to take more time to make moral decisions, an act which mitigates the effects of disgust. One study in support of this conclusion involved telling participants the story of two incestuous siblings who use contraception. Some of the participants were then given a good reason not to harshly judge the siblings and made to wait two minutes before they could report their moral judgments. Participants who spent several minutes considering a compelling reason before judging the siblings were far less likely to label the siblings' actions morally wrong than groups not made to wait and/or shown a faulty reason. The participants still initially experienced revulsion. However, this revulsion experience did not affect the judgment of the group that waited as much as it affected those who did not wait.¹⁰

EXAMINING THE DISGUST ITSELF

Although the argument against the Deep Wisdom Argument presented by Kelly and the defense of his position I presented above should motivate us to separate our disgust reactions from our processes of moral reasoning, such a separation is still insufficient. This is because there is a third type of disgust:

3. Simul-disgust: A person experiences disgust, even if it is only subconscious, and simultaneously makes a moral judgment on the basis of what he or she believe is solid moral reasoning.

This type of disgust was illustrated in another study wherein researchers sprayed fart spray into an empty trash can on a street corner before asking passers-by to fill out questionnaires about moral transgressions. They found that the moral judgments people made were harsher when they were disgusted. This phenomenon emerged even though the

¹⁰ Joseph M. Paxton, Leo Ungar, and Joshua D. Greene, "Reflection and Reasoning in Moral Judgment," *Cognitive Science* 36, 1 (2012): 170-171.

disgust participants experienced was unrelated to the vignettes they were judging.¹¹

This study demonstrates why Kelly did not extend his conclusion far enough. Refusing to use disgust as a justification for our moral decisions is certainly a significant and important step. However, if we focus solely on changing the influence of disgust rather than on influencing the disgust itself, we miss what is perhaps our best opportunity to prevent disgust from influencing moral decision-making: fundamentally changing what disgusts us and subsequent generations.

Changes in the influence of disgust on moral reasoning are entirely possible for a few reasons. First, it is a misconception that disgust, including disgust relating to moral issues, is natural and unavoidable. In actuality, disgust and the causes of disgust are learned responses not observed in children under age five. Children must learn what to find disgusting from their culture.¹² Disgust reactions also vary widely. Consider differences in disgust responses to homosexuality, which differ widely worldwide and even among various groups in the U.S. This variability indicates the flexibility of disgust reactions and shows that we can purposefully and intentionally manipulate what causes disgust in order to separate it from moral reasoning as much as possible.

We can harness the manipulability of disgust triggers in discouraging disgust-motivated moral reasoning in young children who have not yet learned disgust reactions. In effect, we can change the disgust reactions of young children (ultimately greatly limiting or even eliminating disgust-motivated moral reasoning) by manipulating the process of disgust socialization that will influence them. Though no such change will happen immediately, small changes such as the elimination of disgust language from discussions of morality will significantly decrease the extent to which future generations will connect disgust and morality. Over time, the connection will be completely eliminated. In other words, fairly simple changes in our own behavior will have a profound effect on the continuation of disgust's entanglement in morality.

One objection to my position is that I do not advocate eliminating core disgust, which might seem inconsistent with my

¹¹ Simone Schnall et. al., "Disgust as Embodied Moral Judgment," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34 (2008): 1098-99.

¹² Haidt et. al., "Body, Psyche, and Culture: The Relationship Between Disgust and Morality," *Psychology and Developing Societies* 9, 1 (1997): 111.



seeming demonization of disgust. However, core disgust, unlike all other types of disgust, serves the important purpose of providing an easy way to help people avoid harmful substances. Yes, even core disgust reactions cloud our judgment about the severity of harms, as in the fart spray example presented above. However, core disgust signals a real harm in almost all cases. The influence of core disgust is also much less detrimental to good moral judgments than other kinds of disgust because judgments of the harms to which core disgust responds—somewhat exaggerated though they may inevitably be—generally factor only into relatively simple moral decisions, like the decision to avoid contaminated food. Since these decisions are uncontroversial, in most cases they are notably different from disgust triggers that do not cause physical harm, such as homosexuality.

Ultimately, Kelly is correct. Disgust should not affect moral reasoning. However, he provides only minimal evidence for his position, something I attempted to rectify by providing a more comprehensive argument in his defense. Additionally, Kelly does not extend his argument far enough. Because disgust has such a profound effect on our moral reasoning, in order to successfully prevent disgust's undesirable effects we must work to manipulate the causes of disgust themselves. Yes, disgust will inappropriately appear at times because of its transferability, but we should not let the fact that any solution will be imperfect prevent meaningful improvements. Fundamentally, the effort to limit disgust is both a noble and ultimately achievable goal.