

## Foreword

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**B**oth social scientists and humanities scholars have enriched our understanding of disgust through their work. Where these two worlds communicate, the benefits are great. In my lab, experimental psychological studies of disgust and related emotions have been informed by philosophers' insights on the illiberality of disgust (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013; Nussbaum 2004) and by speculations from the humanities on disgust at bad moral character (Giner-Sorolla & Chapman 2016; Miller 1997). The scholars in this volume, who have shared their analyses of disgust in literature and society, often return the favour, citing psychological theory and research on the basic nature of disgust to support their observations.

Psychologists generally acknowledge that disgust's primordial purpose is to protect us from things that could make us ill: spoiled food, bodily wastes of others, cues to disease in physical appearance, death and decay. However, there has been wide diversity of opinion and evidence on what else disgust is about — and, indeed, for (Chapman & Anderson 2013; Russell & Giner-Sorolla 2013). Beyond the 'core disgust' of direct disease risks, disgust can be expressed towards the abnormal sexual acts of other people (Giner-Sorolla & others 2012); towards unfair actions (Cannon, Schnall & White 2012); towards markers of social distinctions (Tyler 2008); towards non-infectious physical conditions such as obesity (Lieberman, Tybur & Latner 2012); towards bodily functions that, even if healthy, remind us of our animal nature (Miller 1997; Goldenberg & others, 2001); towards unpleasant aesthetic targets (Silvia & Brown 2007); and towards harmful acts that show bad character (Giner-Sorolla & Chapman 2016).

These multiple uses of disgust can be explained through a cultural-evolutionary account in which the disease-protection functions of the emotion are exapted, just as anatomical structures in biological evolution over time can serve double duty (Giner-Sorolla 2012). The strong evaluations involved in disgust, the way in which the feeling is beyond discussion and argument (Russell & Giner-Sorolla 2011), and the avoidant and protective behaviour it inspires (van Overveld, de Jong, & Peters 2011) can all be made useful. Disgust feelings have ended up being recruited to protect one's core values, social position, existential peace of mind, and other intangible goods.

But, complicating matters, expressions of disgust may not always be backed up by the full disgust experience as usually understood. We may use the word 'disgust' as a linguistic

metaphor (Nabi 2002), communicate disgust to show our disapproval even when we feel anger (Kupfer & Giner-Sorolla in press), or condemn obese people as disgusting without showing it in spontaneous facial expressions (Vartanian & others 2017). Few studies look at the whole range of expressions and physiological changes accompanying disgust experiences in various contexts. Scholars in the humanities are likewise restricted to considering disgust through a prism of the language and imagery of personal and cultural expressions. Still, the four contributions to the issue show how useful a social approach to disgust can be, one that goes beyond the biological to consider how disgust has staked out a place in our consciousness of self and others.

In her article, Deborah Ross initiates a theme that recurs throughout these articles: how disgust at bodily processes and imperfections, in particular those of women, does the work of social contempt. Some Restoration-era poets sought to undercut the conventional idealised love poetry of the day with anatomically crude verses. Ross illustrates, through analysis of the works of Behn and Manley, how female critics of romantic conventions avoided this vulgarity. They focused instead on the *realpolitik* of male abuses of power or undercut male repulsion with invective against the lofty pedestals of physically perfect expectations. Meanwhile, the male poets Rochester and Swift were set on deploying disgust to drag women down to a lower level, whether or not the poet was content to wallow on that level himself. Ross ends by questioning whether disgust does enough to bring about meaningful change in heterosexual relationships. Although it may crack open some of the stale conventions, the contempt and avoidance that follow on from disgust are a poor foundation on which to build mutual respect and love.

Massimo Bonifazio links the multiple social and psychodynamic undertones of disgust in Grass' *The Tin Drum* through a common emphasis on food and eating. An emotion meant to keep us away from disease need not have anything special to do with eating or vomiting, yet the involvement of the gastric in the human emotion of disgust is undeniable (Meissner, Muth & Herbert 2011). Food imagery, as Bonifazio shows, pulls a single artistic thread through many different sources of disgust in Grass' writing: the sexual as well as the political, moral, and social. Here, the lack of disgust is as much on show as the presence of disgust, as characters engage apathetically or enthusiastically with sensations and situations that would repel the average reader. Because the sense of disgust develops reliably only at five years of age (Rottman 2014), Grass' decision to halt his protagonist's development at the age of three levels an implicit critique at the whole German nation for losing its sense of disgust at things which should repel it. The ambivalent role of smell in Oskar's sexual and social development,

however, leads to a similar conclusion to Ross' analysis. As Bonifazio puts it, 'overcoming the disgust seems to be this "seal of true love"'. Disgust, here, is in itself neither wise nor foolish but a guide that can go astray by abdicating its moral duty.

Clémence Jullien studies a social situation in which multiple meanings of disgust intersect and cover for each other. Untrained people approach the wet and infectious details of childbirth squeamishly. Medical professionals are supposed to overcome this disgust at the indignities of the human body, and most do. However, this does not mean they lose the capacity to be disgusted by other things, as research on medical students handling cadavers has shown (Rozin 2008). The obstetric professionals in India studied by Jullien indeed show no qualms about excretions and body parts that might evoke core disgust. Furthermore, they are legally prohibited from directly expressing their distaste at their patients' low caste and class origins. Nonetheless, some features of their patients do elicit strong and open expressions of disgust. These lie with plausible deniability at the boundary of the body and social identity, comprising perceived offences against taste and hygiene such as smell, hairiness, or tattoos. Jullien shows how such 'performances' of disgust may be intentionally exaggerated beyond actual sensory experience, a way to reinforce morale in the uncomfortable situation of dealing with social inferiors. At the same time, disgusted grimaces and exclamations, like the patronising language these doctors and nurses use, indirectly communicate to patients their proper place.

Finally, Martijn Buijs brings up disgust as an aesthetic emotion, a 'particularly visceral form of ugliness' that carried the standard for a movement in nineteenth-century European arts towards appreciating the force and immediacy of the unpleasant. The focal thinker of the essay, Rosenkranz, appreciates the repugnant only insofar as it can be contrasted to and overcome by the beautiful; to allow it uncontested primacy is to succumb to 'sickness', an apt metaphor given the biological functions of disgust. But the focal artist of the essay, Rimbaud, presents in the sonnet 'Venus Anadyomène' a surrender to this sickness, an unblinking look at the *belle hideusement* that crams its thesis statement and its grossest detail into its final line. The reader might profitably compare this lampoon of the idealised female in art to those in Ross' essay, which were produced two hundred years earlier. It is hard to escape the suspicion that, despite its more advanced development of a totalised aesthetics of the repulsive, Rimbaud's poem presents just as little room for the humanisation of the female subject, even as it topples the frothy image of the goddess into dirty bathwater.

Disgust is only superficially a superficial emotion. These four essays show in different ways how disgust stands at the boundaries of the body but reaches far within, a strong and

complex regulator of how we relate to ourselves and other people. Disgust is often seen as a way to reject and degrade people of a different sex, social class, or culture. This prejudicial use of the emotion is visible, explicitly or implicitly, in all the topics covered in this volume. Sex and gender figure strongly here because the anatomical parts and biological processes that underlie *la différence* also constitute objects of disgust. However, disgust can also be transformed dispassionately into an aesthetics that strives for impact over comfort, or transformed positively into an instinct that denounces those flaws of moral character that are hard to articulate in the language of costs and benefits. Scholarship in the humanities, and the social sciences, will always do well to consider both the attractions and the drawbacks of this multi-functional feeling.

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