

Review of Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The foul and the fair
in aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 208, £18.99 (PBK).)

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Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Savoring Disgust* is a book that, in spite of its seemingly unsavoury subject matter, deserves to be widely read. Written in an accessible yet richly suggestive prose, it is the first systematic investigation in English-speaking contemporary philosophy of the aesthetic and artistic significance of the emotion of disgust. In the last two or three decades disgust has been studied from various different perspectives; following the initial interest of experimental psychologists, the moral, social, even legal and political relevance of the emotion have been explored. However, with a few notable exceptions, which include some of Korsmeyer's own earlier writings, contemporary aesthetics has paid only cursory attention to disgust. In this new book, Korsmeyer engages in a focused and thorough examination of the role of disgust in aesthetics.

Since disgust falls in the category of so-called negative, or unpleasant emotions, the question of its role in aesthetics is naturally framed in terms of a puzzle that has a long philosophical history and is now usually referred to as the paradox of negative emotions. According to the paradox, it is puzzling that people should show the interest they do in undergoing the experience of watching the latest splatter film or looking at St Thomas inserting his finger into one of the resurrected Jesus's wounds in Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas*. In both cases a disgusting subject matter is capable of affording an experience that one might have reasons to value and many will seek; this seems puzzling, almost paradoxical, given the unpleasantness typically felt when encountering something disgusting in real life. The paradox of negative

emotions is especially prominent in the case of disgust given the specific reservations against the compatibility of disgust and aesthetic pleasure expressed by some of the foremost 18th-century aestheticians, including Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Immanuel Kant. Korsmeyer's main aim in the book is to address reservations such as those expressed by 18th-century theorists and make a case for the important place of disgust in art.

She urges that the genus pleasure—and its species aesthetic pleasure—should be understood differently from pain. Whereas pain is a sensation, pleasure is rather like *absorption*: it is absorption in an activity and comes in as many different forms as the activities it is occasioned by. Since pleasure and pain are two different types of phenomena, they are neither opposites nor contraries; hence, they are not mutually incompatible. According to Korsmeyer, these considerations dissolve the *paradox* of negative emotions, literally construed, in that they show that (aesthetic) pleasure is not incompatible with (emotional) pain.

However, Korsmeyer's argument here does not completely convince. Even if pleasure were different from pain in that it does not refer to a specific type of physical sensation (although what of the case of sexual orgasm?), it would not seem straightforward to conclude that pain more broadly understood is never of the same type as, and the contrary of, pleasure, broadly understood. For instance, is not *emotional* pain (e.g. sadness) the contrary of emotional pleasure (e.g. joy)? Moreover, and more importantly, even if pain and pleasure were contraries, or opposites, this would still not be enough to make them mutually incompatible. For instance, one can feel at the same time sad and happy that one is at the end of one's university degree: sad because the university experience is over, but happy because one has achieved something important. In such

a situation, one might be more thrilled than unhappy and judge the experience as overall worth undergoing. Alternatively, one might be torn between happiness and sadness, or be overall displeased instead. In the end, what makes the paradox of negative emotions a paradox is not the incompatibility between pleasure and pain, but that people would seek or value what is painful.

Nonetheless, Korsmeyer's aim in the book is much broader and richer than the formal solution of a paradox. She recognises that the interest people show in what we might call 'disgusting art' is still a perplexing phenomenon, beyond any formal paradox. The account of the phenomenon she favours is built on her view of pleasure as absorption: one can be attracted and absorbed by an experience which nonetheless is a source of emotional unpleasantness for one. This view calls to mind cognitivist solutions to the paradox of negative emotions and their appeal to the knowledge that some works of art can afford whilst also being emotionally distressing. However, although Korsmeyer labels her view as 'cognitive', she is also keen to distinguish her own from other versions of cognitivism. What she has in mind are views such as Noël Carroll's cognitive explanation of the pleasures of horror fictions as lying primarily in knowing how the horror narratives develop, thus uncovering the real nature and causes of the arcane events narrated. On such a view, the fear and disgust aroused by the fictions are something that readers and audiences put up with in order to enjoy the cognitive pleasures. Although appropriate to many horror fictions, Korsmeyer suggests, there are works that arouse disgust—including some horror fictions—which allow a different type of appreciation. This type of appreciation is not as disconnected from the emotional experience as in Carroll's view but involves absorption in the unpleasant emotional experience. The emotional experience, although unpleasant, can be appreciated as it supplies a

type of cognitive gain, an insight, which is less clearly defined yet, in a sense, more suggestive than knowledge. Such an emotional experience Korsmeyer labels ‘aesthetic disgust’.

The characterisation of aesthetic disgust is the key philosophical result contained in this book and the complex web of argument that Korsmeyer offers to support it is a very significant achievement that she delivers with rhetorical mastery. To provide a reconstruction, the argument starts from the contention, mainstream in contemporary philosophy, that emotions have a cognitive component: they carry with them an apprehension of certain features of the world, as well as an attitude towards those features. In Korsmeyer’s terminology, emotions are a vehicle for certain meanings. Disgust is no exception in this respect and it manifests its own peculiar types of meaning. What disgust is especially apt at conveying is, Korsmeyer suggests, meanings of mortality and of the eventual reduction of individual bodies to decaying organic matter. If put in propositional form, Korsmeyer continues, such meanings merely amount to truisms about ourselves. Yet disgust, when aroused by art in certain contexts and in certain ways, allows those meanings to be grasped in a particularly poignant and insightful manner. At the same time, such insights afforded by disgust are cognitive components of the emotion, so grasping them is an integral part of feeling disgust. In the case of certain works of art, Korsmeyer concludes, the disgust that they arouse comes with an insight that makes the unpleasant emotional experience itself an experience that one appreciates, even sometimes *savours*.

Indeed, in some particularly excellent instances of aesthetic disgust the cognitive pleasure is so embedded in the emotional experience that, Korsmeyer says, the two are virtually inseparable. Such cases allow a parallel with the

aesthetic sublime. The terror experienced at what is exceptionally powerful can, when it directs our attention to the awesome forces that cause it, turn into the sublime. In the same way, Korsmeyer suggests, disgust, by reminding us of our mortality and eventual destiny of decay, can turn into what she calls ‘the sublate’. Originally an alchemical term, ‘sublation’ used to refer to the opposite of ‘sublimation’: whereas the latter refers to the direct transition of a substance from a solid to a gaseous phase, the former is a direct transition from gaseous to solid. Metaphorically extending the alchemical/chemical terminology, the suggestion of a higher power marks the transformation of terror into the sublime; conversely, the suggestion of a lower realm of decay and death characterises the conversion of disgust into the sublate. One of the examples of the sublate that Korsmeyer provides is the Ninth Tale from the Fourth Day of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. In the tale a knight discovers the reciprocated love of his wife and one of his dear friends. Infuriated, the knight decides to kill his friend and serve his wife the heart of her lover for dinner. After unknowingly eating such a terrible dish, the wife learns from her husband the real nature of the meal. Horrified by the events, she determines never to eat anything again, and hurls herself out of the dining-room window. In the emotional experience of reading Boccaccio’s story, disgust plays an important part: this is the story of someone eating the heart of their lover. In fact, Korsmeyer argues, disgust has an indispensable part to play in the aesthetic appreciation of the story in that it registers meanings of mortality and materiality within the overall significance of the horrible events narrated. In doing so, the disgusting details give the story its peculiar feel.

In her book Korsmeyer makes an overall convincing and subtly construed case for the compatibility of disgust with artistic appreciation and shows some

of the ways in which feeling disgust can be an appropriate response to a work of art and at the same time contribute to its artistic value. To further understand the specific role of disgust in artistic appreciation, however, one might perhaps have desired to find in the book a clearer distinction between the role of disgust and that of other emotions—fear and terror, especially—in contributing to the pleasures of disgusting art. In fact, most of the examples of art works discussed in the book—including Boccaccio’s tale mentioned above—arouse complex emotional responses, often featuring a strong component of the tragic or ominous. Indeed, 18th-century theorists such as Lessing, although in general distrustful of the disgusting in art, make an exception for some instances of art that evoke disgust “mixed” with terror. But such instances, according to Lessing, afford a pleasurable experience primarily in virtue of the contribution to the mix brought by the terrible, rather than that brought by the disgusting. The reason for this is that Lessing, in line with other 18th-century thinkers, believes that terror is always to a certain extent pleasurable, as it has to excite to action; disgust is on the contrary a purely unpleasant emotion. Explicitly addressing considerations of the kind that Lessing puts forward would have further enriched Korsmeyer’s treatment of the topic and strengthened her argument.

However, Korsmeyer’s book discusses a wealth of issues that is difficult to match and presents a comprehensive and organic approach to a previously under-explored topic. The intelligence of its analysis and the elegance of its prose prove that one can indeed be pleurably absorbed in matters disgusting.