Comment: Kolnai’s Disgust

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**Abstract:** In *The Meaning of Disgust*, Colin McGinn employs elements of the phenomenological theory of disgust advanced by Aurel Kolnai in 1929. Kolnai’s treatment of what he calls “material” disgust and of its primary elicitors—putrefying organic matter, bodily wastes and secretions, sticky contaminants, vermin—anticipates more recent scientific treatments of this emotion as a mode of protective recoil. While Nina Strohminger charges McGinn with neglecting such scientific studies, we here attempt to show how Kolnai goes beyond experimental findings in his careful description of the phenomenological differences between disgust and other emotions of forceful disapproval.

KEYWORDS: disgust, phenomenology.

Disgust is presently much in vogue not only in philosophy but also in fields such as psychology and neurobiology. Such concentrated interest in a shared topic on the part of multiple disciplines can lead to greater overall understanding, and Nina Strohminger (2013) charges Colin McGinn with neglect of scientific studies in his recent book, *The Meaning of Disgust* (2011). In their stead, McGinn makes use of the early theory of disgust articulated by the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai. This essay will consider the ways in which an approach like Kolnai’s converges with and diverges from scientific findings.

Kolnai belongs to the school of phenomenology founded by Husserl, and he followed Husserl and Scheler in the view that human emotions are axiologically sensitive, that is, that they serve to register the value-properties of objects and events and are to that extent modes of perception. The writings of the most talented followers of this phenomenological method, while they employ a terminology that is alien to many contemporary analytic philosophers, are in fact marked by a high degree of precision in their attempts to describe the structures of experience. In his long essay “Der Ekel” from 1929, Kolnai locates the emotion of disgust in the family of deeply-rooted human dispositions for protective recoil, thereby carefully distinguishing a number of different affective responses that are often run together in experience, such as fear, hatred, and disgust. His analysis is not experimental, and because it is grounded in introspection, it may run the risk of idiosyncrasy. On the other hand, it counteracts tendencies to confuse disgust with other sorts of disapproval, which are a potential problem with the quick-response experimental surveys that are the bread and butter of psychological studies.

Writing in the 1920’s, with little science or philosophy on the subject to consult, Kolnai arrived at a very similar catalog of disgust elicitors as was later assembled by scientists such as Rozin, Fallon, McClary, and Curtis mentioned by Strohminger Kolnai articulates two categories of disgust that he labels “material” and “moral.” Under the objects of material disgust he lists the items that are now virtually standard entries on inventories of disgusting objects: putrefying organic matter, bodily wastes and secretions, sticky contaminants, vermin. He also notes the strongly sensory character of this emotion, whose objects are stinking, slimy, sticky, squirmy, pullulating. They look appalling, and the idea of putting them in one’s mouth is gaggingly revolting.

In the category he posits as moral disgust, Kolnai places reactions to objects that are “experienced as a ‘soiling,’ a ‘sullying’ of life and its values,” phenomena which are not in themselves physically disgusting but which awaken associations of physically disgusting acts (Kolnai, 2004: 66). At the same time, he cautions the reader that his remarks on such examples are based on evidence that is less than secure (63). And indeed suspicions justly arise as to whether the putative elicitors of moral disgust (Konai’s candidates include drunkenness, unclean breath, excessive vitality, mechanical and superficial sexuality) form a coherent grouping analogous to those classed under material disgust. Indeed, current theorists are divided as to whether these arouse true disgust at all, or whether the corresponding reactions are better understood as metaphorical ways to express profound disapproval. (McGinn) is rather inclined to the latter view for most cases of supposedly moral disgust (37).)

As concerns material disgust, while scientific and philosophical studies of emotion arrive at similar lists of standard elicitors, the speculations they contain about the nature of the experience of disgust are more divergent. Most scientists view disgust in a homogenizing fashion as a strongly reactive aversion. Both Kolnai and McGinn recognize that there is a peculiar phenomenon of disgust distinct from that of other defense reactions, for the phenomenology of disgust seems to involve—in some persons at least—a sort of attraction to the disgusting object. Kolnai refers to a certain “macabre allure” (42) that is built in to that moment of disgust when we both recoil and marvel at the revolting object before us. This raises the question whether there is some cognitive element involved in and characteristic of the experience of disgust, some concept that this emotion consistently brings to mind and is tied to its affective component. McGinn defends a positive answer to this question, holding that *disgust means death*, or rather life-in-death, summoning a vivid awareness of the fact that organic matter becomes the food for generations of bacteria and worms. Kolnai somewhat similarly describes disgust as “pregnant with death” in virtue of the fact that the disgusting object manifests its own impending corruption (74-5).

It would be an exaggeration, to say the least, to argue that an existential confrontation with death is involved every time one opens a garbage can or swallows a bad clam. Strohminger is correct to point out the error of seeking a theory of disgust in terms of a single unified dimension of meaning along these lines. At the same time, it would be a mistake to allow an embrace of science to ignore those features of the experience of disgust that are disclosed by means of a phenomenological, descriptive approach, including its characteristic “feel” and the shifts of awareness and understanding that disgust occasions. Not only do these features have equal importance to those addressed by current science, they are also the aspects of emotions that fill our conscious awareness, and as such lend significance and value to our lives.

**References**

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