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Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust

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Disgust is a powerful, visceral emotion. It is rooted so deeply in bodily responses that some theorists have hesitated even to classify it as an emotion in the fullest sense, considering it more akin to involuntary reactions such as nausea, retching, and the startle recoil. Like these it is an aversive response and belongs among the body's protective mechanisms. Disgust helps to ensure the safety of the organism by inhibiting contact with what is foul, toxic, and thereby dangerous. But for all of its engagement of bodily responses, disgust is also an emotion that is at work in creating and sustaining our social and cultural reality. It helps us to grasp hierarchies of value, to cope with morally sensitive situations, and to discern and maintain cultural order. So strong is the revulsion of disgust that the emotion itself can appear to justify moral condemnation of its object—inasmuch as the tendency of an object to arouse disgust may seem adequate grounds to revile it. At the same time, the fact that the emotion is quick and reactive may serve to cancel out these grounds by inducing one to reflect on the reasons why disgust is aroused. Thus the experience of disgust both grounds moral perspectives and casts doubt upon their validity. It is therefore by no means a simple, visceral reaction whose cause is obvious and whose meaning is transparent.

In certain respects, disgust appears to be one of the more natural emotive responses. It is one of several basic emotions whose characteristic displays, for example facial expression and gesture, are invariant across cultures.¹ The objects that trigger disgust also have a fairly constant range: things that are decaying and putrefying, that are contaminated and contaminating, and are thus associated with

impurity and threat—such as corpses; open wounds; crawling, pululating maggots. Yet the specific triggers for disgust also obviously vary from place to place. The realm of the edible, above all, provides clear examples of objects that can appear disgusting; but differences among food preferences and criteria for edibility that obtain across the globe, and even in the same individual at different times, furnish evidence for the flexibility of both taste and disgust. What is considered disgusting at one dining table is regarded as delicious at another. Thus, whatever the reactive, somatic components that figure in disgust, it is an emotion with a highly complex psychology and one that cannot be classed as simply a mechanism that provides quick protection against the dangers that flow from ingesting toxins. It is in fact a highly cognitive emotion, which provides information about features of the outer world not readily available by other means, and which also reveals something about the complexities and shadows of our inner psychic life.

Here at the start of the twenty-first century, philosophical discussions of disgust are on the increase. The revival of interest in emotions and their contribution to moral understanding represented in the works of thinkers such as Robert Solomon, Martha Nussbaum, Lawrence Blum, Patricia Greenspan, Bernard Williams, and Virginia Held has led to serious treatment of a subject that once was barely a bump on the philosophical horizon. In 1929 when Aurel Kolnai published his essay 'Der Ekel' in Edmund Husserl's *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, the house journal of the phenomenological movement, he could truly assert that disgust was a "sorely neglected" topic. (The Bibliographical Note that appears at the end of Kolnai's essay indicates how scant were the resources from which he could draw, although Kolnai's survey of relevant literature appears to have been more impressionistic than systematic.)² Forty years later his shorter piece on 'The Standard Modes of Aversion: Fear, Disgust, and Hatred' still predated much philosophical attention to this emotion, which remains among the least scrutinized of mental phenomena.³ Now, however, this situation appears to be changing as philosophers, psychologists, and historians of culture are turning their attention not only to emotions in general but more specifically to the large and disturbing set of aversive emotions, including disgust and its kin: fear, contempt, horror, loathing.

Kolnai's essay appears remarkably prescient against the background of this newer scholarship. Indeed, the analysis he undertook virtually alone in the 1920s sustains comparison with such recent works as William Ian Miller's comprehensive *Anatomy of Disgust*, and also with aesthetic analyses of the emotional components of horror aroused by film and literature such as are offered by Noël Carroll, Cynthia Freeland, or Julia Kristeva.⁴ Most importantly, Kolnai's work supplements the burgeoning philosophical and psychological studies of emotion with his vivid treatment of the specifics of aversion. His own approach grows out of his background in phenomenology and is methodologically closest to the work of such philosophers as Husserl and Meinong. Like the latter two Kolnai writes in a complex style that is occasionally difficult to penetrate. On the other hand, his detailed conceptual analysis is not weighed down by any general system, and it sits well with the methods of the analytic philosophers with whom Kolnai made his home in his later years. What is more, Kolnai is sensitive to the attraction as well as to the repulsion of disgust, and his insights dovetail with some of the observations of psychoanalysis. The first of Kolnai's books, *Psychoanalysis and Sociology*,⁵ published when he was only twenty, was in fact a study of the social and political applications of Freud's ideas, and Kolnai was himself a member of the International Psychological Association. He abandoned psychoanalysis in 1925, shortly before writing 'Der Ekel'.

Psychoanalysis is of course one of the few schools of thought that never neglected the phenomenon of disgust. Kolnai's work thus spans a bridge not only between phenomenology and analytic philosophy but also between the philosophical and the psychological study of emotions, and for this reason, as well as for the intrinsic interest of his ideas, Kolnai's 'Disgust' repays close reading today.

Kolnai's Life

Aurel Kolnai was born in 1900 in Budapest, then still one of the capital cities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was born Aurel Stein into a liberal, secular Jewish family; but he changed his surname to Kolnai in 1918, perhaps because, in the new, territorially truncated Hungarian state, being a Jew could mean becoming an ideological

(even if not yet a physical) target. In 1920 Kolnai moved to Vienna, where, supplemented by funds from his father, he scratched a living as free-lance writer and editor. Two years later, he enrolled as a student of philosophy at the University of Vienna, where his teachers included Heinrich Gomperz, Moritz Schlick, Felix Kaufmann, Karl Bühler, and Ludwig von Mises. Eventually he became drawn to the thinking of Franz Brentano and to the phenomenology of Brentano's student Edmund Husserl, and for a brief period in the summer of 1928 he studied under Husserl in Freiburg.

Kolnai paid particular attention to the ideas of the so-called Munich school of realist phenomenologists, and especially to the work of Max Scheler, the most prominent figure in the Munich school, whom Kolnai first read in 1924. Kolnai was early drawn to Christianity, and Scheler's Catholicism seems to have strengthened his interest in the Catholic religion, as did the works of the English writer G. K. Chesterton. Kolnai was received into the Catholic Church in 1926 on the very day that he graduated from the University of Vienna.⁶ Probably the most influential product of his Vienna years was his book *The War Against the West*, an extensive and passionate commentary criticizing the philosophical and ideological writings of National Socialism, written by Kolnai in the cafés of Vienna's Nazi underground, where literature otherwise subject to censorship was readily available.⁷

Kolnai remained in Vienna until 1937. He then lived from time to time in Paris, increasingly mindful of the threats posed by the expansion of the Hitler Reich. Shortly after his marriage to his wife, Elizabeth, in 1940, the two fled through Spain and Portugal, finally managing to emigrate first to the United States and then to Canada, where Aurel obtained his first position teaching philosophy, at the Université de Laval in Québec City. Ten years later Kolnai reached England, where he held a part-time position as 'Visiting Lecturer' at Bedford College in the University of London. Kolnai's later writings display an interesting combination of English common-sense philosophy in the style of G.E. Moore with the type of painstaking philosophical description developed by the Munich realist phenomenologists. Kolnai was throughout his life skeptical of philosophical Grand Systems in the style of Hegel or Marx in a way that reveals not only his Anglophile, Catholic background but also his roots in Austrian, not German, thinking.⁸

Kolnai's Intellectual Context

In his general approach to emotions and their objects, Kolnai follows a phenomenological method that focuses on the mode of intentionality at work in different types of experiences and the nature of objects thereby revealed. Intentionality is mental directedness towards an object, whether it be real or imaginary, that thereby becomes an 'intentional object'. (For those readers unfamiliar with the philosophical use of this term, it is important not to confuse the colloquial sense of 'intention', which means purpose, with the philosophical sense initiated by Brentano.⁹ It is the latter usage consistently employed by Kolnai.) Like such predecessors as Meinong and Scheler, he assumes that affective responses are the means by which the human mind apprehends certain qualities in the world, most importantly, those qualities that pertain to the value or disvalue of objects.

Intentionality, for Brentano and his successors, means the 'directedness towards an object' that is characteristic of our mental experience. This simple phrase disguises a multitude of problems, however, in virtue of the fact that we can be directed towards objects even when these objects do not exist (for example when we make errors, or are engaged with the objects described in works of fiction). Moreover, whether we are intentionally directed towards an object is not a simple all-or-nothing affair: thus the detective who is hunting for the murderer may be directed towards one and the same object in a succession of different mental experiences (as *the man I interviewed yesterday, the owner of the dagger found next to the body, and so on*) without being aware of the fact that these objects are one and the same. Brentano was interested especially in the different types of intentional directedness involved in perception, judgment, loving and hating, and so on. He saw the goal of philosophy as providing an exhaustive catalogue of the categories of our mental life. Meinong, we might say, extended Brentano's goal to apply not merely to mental acts as events in people's minds but also to the objects of mental experience. Meinong seeks in his 'theory of objects' to provide a catalogue of all of the various different sorts of objects, both existing and non-existing, actual and possible. The most influential phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, then seeks to bring together these two complementary concerns of Brentano and

Meinong within a single discipline, a discipline combining both descriptive psychology and descriptive ontology.

It is against this background that we are to understand Kolnai's work. Both Husserl and Kolnai hold that there is a certain intelligible correlation between the structures of mental acts on the one hand and the structures of their objects on the other. Thus we see colors, hear sounds, and so on, and by reflecting upon the structures of our acts directed towards these different sorts of objects we can draw conclusions also about the essential structures manifested by these objects themselves.

The first group of philosophers to embrace Husserl's phenomenological method were gathered together at the very beginning of the twentieth century in Munich. To the first generation of this group belong Max Scheler, Alexander Pfänder, Moritz Geiger, and Adolf Reinach, and to the second generation Dietrich von Hildebrand, the recently canonized Edith Stein, Aurel Kolnai, and the Polish phenomenologist and aesthetician Roman Ingarden. (It was especially in Poland, as a result of Ingarden's influence, that the Munich school continued into the second half of the twentieth century, and one third-generation member of the school is Karol Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II.)

The Munich philosophers believed that Husserl's ideas allowed them to investigate whole new territories of ontological structure hitherto unexplored by philosophy. Husserl himself, as they conceived it, had applied this method in his *Logical Investigations* to the structures of perceptual and judging acts and of the corresponding objects. The Munich phenomenologists now extended this method to other spheres, most impressively in the work of Adolf Reinach who, in his *The A Priori Foundations of Civic Law*, published in the first volume of Husserl's *Jahrbuch* in 1913, described the ontological structures of those varieties of communicative language-use we call *promises*. Reinach thereby anticipated what later came to be known as the theory of speech acts. He details the different ways in which we use language in order to perform different sorts of actions, pointing out how some of these actions have specific legal and ethical consequences in the way in which, for example, a promise gives rise to a mutually correlated claim and obligation.

The importance of the Munich school for the history of the phenomenological movement can be seen in the fact that when, in

1913, Husserl published the first volume of his *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* (a journal re-established in America after the war under the title *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*), his editorial board consisted precisely of the leading figures of the Munich school: Scheler, Pfänder, Geiger, and Reinach. This volume contains, in addition to Reinach's work on promises, a large monograph by Scheler, entitled 'Formalism in Ethics and Material Value Ethics', which is an application of Husserl's phenomenological method to the sphere of value. One after another the members of the Munich school took different areas of human experience and of the associated domain of objects and subjected them to phenomenological investigation. Ingarden, for example, applied the method to our aesthetic experiences and to the associated structures in the realm of works of art.

The most notorious member of the Munich school, and also the most influential, was Max Scheler. It was Scheler, more than anyone else, who was responsible for the adoption by Heidegger of something like the Munich method in his *Being and Time*, a work also first published in Husserl's *Jahrbuch*, where we find phenomenological investigations of the world of objects correlated with our everyday working activity, the world of tools or equipment (of tables, chairs, spoons, forks, shoes, bricks). Scheler developed the idea that feelings serve to provide a cognitive basis for ethics in the same sort of way that thinking provides the cognitive basis for logic. Feelings are a way of coming to know certain entities called values, just as thinking is a way of coming to know certain other entities called facts. (Compare in this connection Pascal's notion of a 'logic of the heart' and, in more recent analytic philosophy, De Sousa's claim that in emotions we perceive axiological properties.¹⁰) For Scheler emotions are absolutely and unproblematically sensitive to value. Feeling, Scheler held, ought to be accorded equal rights with thinking as a route to or source of knowledge. He thereby extended the phenomenological method from the rather intellectualistic realms in which it had been applied above all by Husserl into the more 'intuitive' territories of feeling and emotion.¹¹ Thus his phenomenology is a way of doing philosophy which would allow us to grasp the value and significance which in his eyes is endemic to the world of human experience, as contrasted with the Cartesian, 'intellectualist' phenomenology, which one might associate perhaps with Husserl. We

cannot try deliberately to observe these meanings or values in intellectualistic fashion, and we cannot try to use the instruments of logic and science in order to build up theories about these things. For in order to use logic or thinking to observe entities of the given sort, we should have to have grasped them already, and the only way we can grasp them is via feeling and intuition, or via love and hate. Kolnai echoes some of this trust in the ability of emotions to reveal the world in his treatment of disgust.

It is Meinong's terminology, however, that Kolnai draws on at the very start of his essay when he introduces his subject in terms of the distinction between *Dasein* and *Sosein*. *Dasein*, a term used also by Heidegger, means something like 'being there', specifically the sort of being there, the sort of existence, characteristic of human beings. It is used by Kolnai to refer to the fact that objects are sometimes immediately present in our surroundings so that they affect our very being, as in the case of objects of anxiety or fear, also emotions to which Kolnai devotes attention in these essays. Anxiety and fear, which are both meanings of the German *Angst*, are often taken to be separate affects, anxiety connoting an amorphous mood more than an emotion with an intentional object. Kolnai rejects this approach and treats both together as a single phenomenon. The interchangeability of terms is confirmed by his later essay, 'The Standard Modes of Aversion: Fear, Disgust, and Hatred', which he wrote in English. In 'Der Ekel' the term Kolnai usually chooses is *Angst* (anxiety or fear), occasionally *Furcht* (fear). In this translation the editors have normally rendered the term as 'fear', occasionally using also 'anxiety' depending on context and ease of idiom, but the reader should bear in mind that the contrast often carried in English between the two emotions is not intended. According to Kolnai's analysis, the states of anxiety and fear are different presentations of the same emotion; both contrast in the same ways to disgust. He calls into question the notion of a 'free-floating anxiety' which would exist in the absence of any intentional object and surmises that this notion indicates confusion regarding some vague or dispersed object rather than no object at all.

Anxiety or fear arises in response to an object that is fearsome. It is directed not only to that object but also to oneself, since in the experience of fear, one attends not so much to qualities of the object as to the very being of that object and the dangers it poses. One

could say that the being of the object and its proximity threaten the being of oneself. The behavior that fear triggers is typically flight, and when fleeing an object one is unlikely to dwell on its particular properties. The intentionality of disgust, in contrast to fear or anxiety, is directed more to the *Sosein*, the 'so-being' of its object, that is, to the qualities of the object as they are presented to our senses—its features, traits, characteristics. The intentional direction of this emotion is almost entirely outward, and its focus on qualities implies a certain aesthetic nature of disgust, as Kolnai observes. By this mention of aesthetic character, Kolnai is not referring to the role disgust can play in artistic experience, though his ideas can well be extended to that field and thereby supplement recent discussions of horror that examine the fascination with blood and putrefaction in art. What Kolnai has in mind, rather, is the Kantian doctrine of the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience, by which is meant that such experience cares little for the actual existence of its object but is wholly occupied with the qualities experienced. Disgust is not one of the more obvious means to apprehend the aesthetic characteristics of objects, and it is a mark of Kolnai's originality that he explored it in these terms. As he points out, the intentional structure of disgust directs our attention so strongly towards the revolting properties of its object as virtually to rivet attention. Disgust is a probing exploration; the tip of its arrow of intentionality "penetrates the object." This character of the intentionality of disgust imparts a complex, Janus-faced feel to the emotion, one that almost savors its object at the same time that it is revolted by it. Thus Kolnai notices the peculiar, perhaps perverse, magnetism of the disgusting from the very start of his analysis.

Kolnai's Approach to Emotions

In the categories of contemporary philosophy, Kolnai's approach allies him with what can be termed broadly the cognitivist camp of emotion theory. Cognitivists hold that emotions facilitate our understanding of the world in a way that coordinates with rational modes of cognition such as judgment and inference.¹² Cognitivism in this sense holds that emotions are not to be understood as mere feelings, agitations, or commotions that occur in the mind, and it is

also therefore inappropriate to consider them on the model of sensations such as pleasures or pains. Unlike the latter, emotions 'reach out' towards their objects, and thus they have intentionality. As we have noted, the latter term refers not to purpose or to deliberate intent but rather to the fact that mental phenomena such as emotions and beliefs are 'about' something; they are 'directed towards' some object or other, whether a real object, an imaginary object, or a state of affairs. If I fear spiders, my fear is directed to spiders and they are its intentional object; if I fear ghosts, the intentional object of my fear is ghosts, even in spite of the fact that none exists. If I am worried that the weather will turn bad, the intentional direction of my worry is towards the state of affairs expressed through the proposition that the weather will turn bad. It is important that this specialized sense of 'intention' and 'intentional' be borne in mind to avert misreading Kolnai's text to imply that people might deliberately set out to disgust themselves.

At certain periods in philosophy, emotions have been dismissed as interferences with reason and therefore barriers to knowledge. This was the case during the heyday of the powerful logical positivist tradition that reigned in the first part of the twentieth century, where this view expressed itself also in the so-called emotive theory of ethics, according to which ethical statements have no cognitive content but are merely expressions of the feelings of the speaker. Such opinions have rightly been eclipsed in recent years from philosophical thinking emerging from several directions. These include the revival of Aristotelianism in ethics, attention in epistemology to different means by which ideas may be grasped and formulated, expansion of the scope of philosophy of mind and consciousness, the rise of cognitive science, and even through attention on the part of the philosophically minded to physiological studies of the brain.¹³ Certainly Kolnai would agree with what is now the majority view to the effect that emotions are means of obtaining knowledge. Emotions yield a type of cognition that is unavailable by any means other than emotional experience itself. Thus it is not as if emotion would merely supply in a dramatic and affective way information about the world that is also available by other, more rational means. When we are disgusted by an object, we have an immediate apprehension of its qualities and an intuition of its nature to which unaided reason would be blind. This perspective has profound

implications for the work in ethical theory which occupied most of Kolnai's philosophical attention, including work which was assembled and edited by some of his London colleagues and published in 1978 in the volume *Ethics, Value, and Reality*.¹⁴ In the latter part of the first of the two essays printed here, the ethical objects of disgust crown his reflections concerning emotional aversions.

There is another, narrower, sense of 'cognitivism' presently in use with which Kolnai sits somewhat less easily. This approach seeks to vindicate the role of emotions in cognition by arguing that emotions are rational insofar as they rest upon warranted beliefs. Anger, for instance is not just a groundless psychic upheaval; it is a response to a belief that one has been wronged. The justifiability of belief and the appropriateness of the emotion in response to that type of belief endow emotions with their cognitive reliability. An approach along these lines is probably the majority view at present within emotion theory—that emotions rest upon a complex set of psychological factors, including relevant beliefs. The latter are assessed for truth and falsity, warrant, justification, and so on, in the same way that any proposition may be. With soundly grounded beliefs one may be assured of having rational and justified emotions that are dependable motives for action. The reliance on beliefs serves several purposes in emotion theory. Perhaps most importantly, it establishes grounds on which emotions can be defended against the extreme claim that they have no epistemic standing and are dangerous and irrational mental episodes that are more likely to distort than to clarify understanding. Certainly some emotional experiences fit this description; the common examples are surges of rage, mawkish sentimentality, and blinding love. These are all deemed unjustified because of an absence of well-founded belief. Without the relevant grounding belief that one has been wronged, for example, the anger one experiences at a supposed wrongdoer is baseless. If one discovers that the belief was in error, the anger ought to disappear (though it may leave behind a residue of agitation). If it does not and rage persists, the subject is truly irrational. Sentimentality is often criticized on the grounds that it indicates a refusal to acknowledge the true nature of its object, endowing it with a value it does not possess.¹⁵ And the distortion of belief that love can cause is commonly acknowledged in the expression 'love is blind'. The requirement that an emotion rest upon a well-founded belief does not insist that the belief be true; that would

be too stringent. Grief is an incoherent upheaval without a belief that some terrible event has occurred; but if one has good reason to think that it has, even if one is mistaken, then grief is a completely justified response. Indeed, its absence likely signals that one's understanding of a situation is doubtful. (Recall Aristotle's claim that in order for a person exercising practical reason to attain the virtue of justice, he must feel anger at the proper object and to the proper degree.) The coordination of the intentional objects of beliefs with the intentional objects of emotions yields a way to assess affective responses by means of criteria of reliability and justification. This is one of the shared goals of the several cognitivist perspectives in current emotion theory.¹⁶

While in certain cases Kolnai would have no argument with this conclusion, his approach is importantly different, for he does not lodge the cognitive component of emotion in any grounding belief. The affective experience itself occasions an understanding of the world, and no analytically separable layer of beliefs is required to give warrant to this particular affective grasp of the situation. Not all emotions, of course, are structurally the same, and few theorists presume that they must be. Indeed, so different are emotions that there is a school of thought that rejects their typology under one genus altogether.¹⁷

Some philosophers and scientists believe that cognitivism has overreached its grasp and rendered emotions too much like beliefs: too rational, too cognitive—and as a consequence, too human and too far removed from our biological heritage. This approach claims that in their effort to redeem emotions from the charge of epistemic incoherence and moral irrelevance, cognitivists have underestimated the roles of sense experience and desire in emotions and have neglected the degree to which emotional responses are shared with non-human animals.¹⁸ The critics thus emphasize the degree to which at least some emotions are not subject to the override of deliberative faculties and function rather as reactive mechanisms. Philosopher Paul Griffiths divides emotions into three categories: quick-response affect programs, higher-order cognitive emotions, and socially-defined psychological states, concentrating on the first, which are illuminated by scientific studies of the brains and behavior of humans and other animals and by evolutionary theory. Affect programs are biologically based response syndromes that have evolved

to cope with the challenges presented by hostile environments.¹⁹ Griffiths's approach minimizes the belief components of the emotions in this category, stressing instead their reactive nature and the fact that they utilize modular, nonrational paths of the brain disjoint from those at work in deliberative reasoning. Disgust is one of the emotions better described as an affect program, along with surprise, anger, fear, sadness, and joy. All of these affects tend to bypass higher, deliberative responses. One may react with fear to objects that one knows are not dangerous, for example non-venomous spiders and snakes, and this reaction may then be nearly impossible to overcome. The triggers of disgust are things that are foul. Its evolutionary benefit is to protect the organism from ingestion of toxic substances and to insert that protection at the earliest possible point, namely when the organism first encounters the object. Griffiths refers to these basic emotions as pancultural. They are subject to a degree of cultural molding, but disgust, fear, and anger are comparatively recalcitrant and difficult to override by deliberation or education. As he puts it, "the affect program states are phylogenetically ancient, informationally encapsulated, reflexlike responses which seem to be insensitive to culture."²⁰

Kolnai would disagree with the reductionist tenor of this account, for he considers disgust an emotion as complex as any other and not to be excluded from the company of higher-order cognitive emotions such as guilt or grief or embarrassment. Kolnai, too, distinguishes among different sorts of emotions, but he does so on more phenomenological grounds. Some are strongly intentional, meaning that their feeling quality reaches powerfully out towards their objects. Some, like vague curiosity or mild irritation, are weakly intentional; they but lightly graze their objects. Disgust is an aversive emotion of the first, forceful sort. Even all aversive emotions are not the same, and one of Kolnai's most careful contributions to emotion theory arises from the meticulous distinctions he draws among fear or anxiety, disgust, and hatred. To assert that basic responses such as disgust are relatively primitive reactions that are immune to the influences of culture and learning is not borne out by reflection on instances of disgust or on the objects that are typically found to be disgusting. Kolnai would approve, however, of Griffiths's account of the immediacy and potency of emotional reactions, for he is attentive to the subjectivity of emotions, including

the bodily changes they occasion. He recognizes also with the affect-program theorists a degree of stimulus-response that admits of little control, especially with certain aversions. This feature is especially important in the case of disgust, an emotion marked by unmistakable physical reactions. The involuntary component of disgust leads to consideration of the powerful and central role of the bodily senses in the activation of this emotion.

The Sensuous Nature of Disgust

All theorists of disgust recognize a feature of this emotion that is nearly unique: its requirement that there be a *sensory* experience, of a quite specific type, that triggers the emotion. As William Ian Miller observes, "What the idiom of disgust demands is reference to the senses. It is about what it feels like to touch, see, taste, smell, even on occasion hear, certain things. Disgust cannot dispense with direct reference to the sensory processing of its elicitors. All emotions are launched by some perception; only disgust makes that process of perceiving the core of its enterprise."²¹ However, this initial agreement among theorists rapidly gives way to debate over just which sense is the primary conduit for disgust.

Researchers who are chiefly interested in disgust as a mechanism that has evolved for protective response tend to place the sense of taste at the center of the emotion. Darwin, for instance, saw disgust as a response that indicates the opposite of gustatory pleasure, linking it with the rejection of objects that are considered inappropriate to eat.²² Maximally inappropriate are those objects that are actually toxic to ingest, which is another reason to link the disgust response with taste and with eating. Darwin initiates a line of thinking that considers emotions to be responses that have evolved for certain purposes to ensure the well-being of the species, an approach that fosters a link between the affective reactions of human and non-human animals.²³ Such a perspective tends to minimize the cognitive aspects of emotions and to emphasize their mechanical features, as we have just seen with Griffiths's classification of disgust as an affect program that inhibits ingestion of what is foul. Thus psychologist Paul Rozin, who began his extensive inquiries into disgust with experiments that measured what rats would and would not eat, also

considers the core sense of disgust to be taste. (Although Rozin began his research by inferring the qualities of disgust from rats' aversion to foods that made them ill, as it developed he came to interpret human disgust as a recognition of the need to retain barriers between our human and our animal nature. Things that disgust us are things that remind us of our animal origins.)²⁴ Disgust is thereby seen as a fundamentally *rejecting* emotion. The function of disgust "reduces sensory contact with distasteful substances in the mouth cavity and tends toward expelling those substances."²⁵ Taste, with its role in eating and drinking, is also the sense closest to the most powerful visceral response to what is disgusting: vomiting.

Other theorists of disgust are more inclined to emphasize smell, and Kolnai belongs to this camp. The objects of taste are more limited than those of smell, he observes, for although the senses of taste and smell are so closely co-ordinated as to function virtually as one sense, we eat relatively little of what enters our olfactory range. Smell occurs with a degree of distance between the experiencing subject and the object of perception, and therefore it has a larger compass than does taste. Yet the objects of smell are within sufficient proximity to threaten and revolt, unlike those of vision or hearing, which may be quite remote. Kolnai sees the intentionality of disgust as reaching out towards objects, and his description of smell vividly pictures a questing nose, searching out its objects, more intimate with them than is the case with objects of vision or hearing, and partaking also in the immediate visceral response of the olfactory sense.

In the realm of touch, too, there are examples of disgusting objects, such as the slithery creatures one steps on while wading in murky ponds. Yet their qualities are not in themselves disgusting, according to Kolnai, who points out that if softness and slipperiness were by nature disgusting then it would be inexplicable that one could ever like aspic. Hearing is virtually free from disgust, although vision, which can take in vivid images of putrefaction and suppuration, provides ample scope for disgusting scenes. Seeing, touching, and smelling all grasp the materiality of objects, which is where the central qualities of the disgusting reside. Disgust is intercategory, in that its objects may be apprehended by means of different senses, and like the experience of eating it can be directed towards a complex object which spans different sensory modalities. In short, the primary sense of disgust is smell, though other sensory conduits are also com-

monly involved; in any event, disgust always contains a strong sensory component, real or imaginary, at its core. Proximity is also a feature of the experience of disgust, for by being near a disgusting object one risks contamination. Like infection, disgust spreads—from the disgusting object to the disgusted subject. The recoil induced by this aversion recognizes the danger of being nearby.

The Objects of Disgust

The role of the proximity of the disgusting object engenders speculation about the meaning of the object and why it triggers this particular emotion: whether it threatens, contaminates, scares, or just plain revolts. Among those theorists who have reflected upon the phenomenon of disgust, there is most agreement about the types of objects that trigger this emotion. Kolnai's own list of the disgusting converges with similar rosters advanced by Miller, Sartre, Rozin, Kristeva, and scholars of the horror genre of art. Agreement on objects, however, does not entail agreement about the reasons why these objects provoke disgust.²⁶ Kolnai analyzes the intentional objects of disgust and those features of objects that typically inspire the peculiar revulsion that is characteristic of this emotion. He itemizes nine exemplary traits of what he terms the "materially disgusting," beginning with putrefaction, excrement, bodily secretions, and dirt, and continuing with disgusting animals, especially insects when they appear with the apparent excess of swarms; foods in certain conditions; human bodies that are too near; exaggerated fertility; disease and deformation. Objects of material disgust share the impression of life gone bad, of flesh turning towards death, and of a primordial and profuse regeneration of life from the muck of decaying organic matter. Things that rot and putrefy become the fuel for maggots and bacteria; insects in swarms give the impression of excessive, mindless generation, of life "senseless, formless, surging." Kolnai refers to this sometimes as a sense of redundancy of life, provoked by the experience of reproduction in excess that lacks the structure of life but merely enacts fecundity—overflow, extravagant profusion far beyond necessity.

In the two decades after Kolnai's article appeared, there were several explorations of disgust by European philosophers that at least

in the short run achieved more recognition than his own essay. Kolnai's descriptions anticipated and perhaps even influenced Georges Bataille and the development of his theory of the *informe*, his analysis of social abjection, and his scatological and pornographic writing.²⁷ (Bataille was familiar with Kolnai's work and kept notes on this essay.)²⁸ But probably the philosophy that most obviously resonates with Kolnai is Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, which hinges on a sense of the disgust and dread that existence itself occasions. Kolnai's reference to revulsion at the very existence of brute life without governing reason sounds similar to the dreadful awareness of facticity expressed in Sartre's writings. Sartre concludes *L'Être et le néant* with a long excursus into the disgusting; his character Roquentin in *La Nausée* is filled with loathing as he realizes the recalcitrant, mindless materiality of things, which merely are, without reason or purpose. So unrestricted is existence by the order of any real categories that the objects of his perception do not even retain their identities but ooze and shift with unsettling indeterminacy. Roquentin's famous encounter with the roots of a chestnut tree indicates how disgust marks an existential epiphany of sorts: "Had I dreamed of this enormous presence? It was there, in the garden, toppled down into the trees, all soft, sticky, soiling everything, all thick, a jelly . . . I hated this ignoble mess. Mounting up, mounting up as high as the sky, spilling over, filling everything with its gelatinous slither . . . I knew it was the World, the naked World suddenly revealing itself, and I choked with rage at this gross, absurd being."²⁹ Even in this brief quotation one can see that Sartre is treating disgust in terms of a larger phenomenon of revulsion at what he considers the meaninglessness of life, and by comparison Kolnai's cooler treatment, which assiduously distinguishes among types of aversion, is far less inclined to draw the kinds of conclusions that Roquentin finds revealed by his own emotion. Kolnai takes disgust seriously, for it is an emotion that discloses important values; but his approach is more distant and even perhaps more scientific in its tone, reflecting also a sharp contrast in personality and politics between Kolnai and Sartre.

With reference to a more recent generation of thinkers, we can see that Kolnai adumbrates treatments of disgust such as that found in Kristeva's notion of the abject and Miller's summary of the disgusting as 'life soup', a term he coins in *The Anatomy of Disgust*.

What disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life, and not just because life implies its correlative death and decay: for it is decay that seems to engender life. Images of decay imperceptibly slide into images of fertility and out again. Death thus horrifies and disgusts not just because it smells revoltingly bad, but because it is not an end to the process of living but part of a cycle of eternal recurrence. The having lived and the living unite to make up the organic world of generative rot—rank, smelling, and upsetting to the touch. The gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wiggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation.³⁰

Kolnai notes the degree to which proximity figures in disgust, for that which disgusts presses too close and therefore might contaminate or infect, threatening the integrity and cleanliness of one's body. Not only decaying or oozing substances but the unwashed bodies of others, as well as those who make unwanted sexual advances, are quite likely to arouse disgust. Kolnai notes the borderline that disgust walks between life and death; disgust records the transition states where the integrity of an organism begins to fall apart, as when a putrefying corpse manifests the change from that which was living and human to a mass of undifferentiated, stinking ooze. The disgusting is, as he puts it, "pregnant with death." In spite of its power to revolt, however, Kolnai does not fold disgust into the recoil of fear. He does not see the apprehension of a threat to one's own self as describing the heart of the emotion of disgust, and in this he differs from those theorists who speculate that the core of this aversion is a recognition that one's self-integrity is in danger of disintegration from the polluting force of the disgusting. Kolnai's notion of disgust is therefore different from Kristeva's notion of the abject, for example. Abjection is a complex emotional response that includes, in addition to disgust, vestiges of fear and desire and a dreadful shadow of the fragility of one's personal identity. Certainly in experiencing disgust we perceive also the threat of the disgusting; but this threat does not present itself with the kind of power that would trigger fear. The object of disgust lingers in consciousness as something disturbing, yet "less than I." In both 'Disgust' and 'The Standard Modes of Aversion' Kolnai assiduously distinguishes disgust from fear and loathing, even while recognizing that in actual experience these emotions often come in bundles. Fear and disgust are twin emotions that together comprise horror and are

deliberately exploited in what Carroll calls the "art horror" of movies and stories, as with the gross special effects of horror movies.³¹ But the double intentional direction of fear or anxiety—towards both the external object and one's self—is muted in disgust, which is almost wholly directed outwards towards the features of the object. Structurally, these two emotions need to be distinguished, even though they appear so frequently as fused or blended together in actual experience. As Kolnai puts it in the beginning of his essay, fear is focused on the *Dasein* of the object, whereas disgust, the more aesthetic of the two emotions because of its invitation to dwell on the presentational qualities of its object, is directed towards the latter's *Sosein*—to particular features—rather than on the fact of its being. Even though fear and disgust occur together so frequently that they sometimes appear to be a unified experience, Kolnai's meticulous separation of the two that he derives from the application of his phenomenological approach is borne out by certain physiological studies of these emotions: psychologists note that a subject experiencing fear, for instance, has an elevated pulse, while with disgust the heart rate slows.³² Neurological investigation indicates that recognition of the two emotions is processed at different areas of the brain: the amygdala for fear, the insula and basal ganglia for disgust.³³

Kolnai's careful study of the fear, disgust, and hatred that is initiated in 'Disgust' and developed more fully in 'The Standard Modes of Aversion' suggests a solution to a troubling observation often made regarding emotions in general, namely, that there seem to be so many more 'negative' than 'positive' emotions (or at least more names for the former than the latter). As negative counterparts of love, for instance, we can name hate, loathing, contempt, abhorrence, abomination. As counterparts of placidity or acceptance there are all manner of varieties of anger: fury, rage, indignation, resentment, exasperation, annoyance, aggravation, and so forth. (The list of anger-related terms is particularly long.) Reflection on the disparity between the relatively short list of positive or happy emotion terms and the huge varieties of negative or aversive emotions, might lead one to uncomfortable conclusions about human nature. But Kolnai supplies us with a matter-of-fact observation about the *objects* of different emotions that circumvents the need for deeper explanations: positive or 'pro' attitudes simply have a wider range of objects

than do negative or 'con' attitudes. The latter are more specific, more tied to particular objects. Thus there are no real opposites for emotions (love, hate, and so on). The emotions are asymmetrical, and they only appear to line up as opposites one to another.³⁴

Fear, disgust, and hatred are aversions that all serve to bring about recoil and avoidance, but they function differently.³⁵ Fear is structured to induce flight and rests on the perception of a strong causal nexus between the intentional object and a danger to the subject. Fear is thus keenly aware of its object and of its proximity, but it is not intrinsically interested in its qualities. As we have seen, things are quite different in disgust, where sensible features of objects are presented most vividly, inducing elements of fascination. Like fear, disgust induces avoidance; like hatred, it compels interest. Hatred gives rise to a particularly intense interest in its object; its intention is "inquisitive, aggressive, propulsive." It has an especially palpable historical character that accounts for why a subject hates an object, and therefore it typically has a specific, individual reference. One may hate one or two persons, for example, but few of us hate people in general. For this reason, lists of typically disgusting objects are more readily compiled than lists of objects of hate.

One of the central examples on every theorist's list of the kinds of objects that become disgusting include foods, or more precisely, things that ought to be edible but that for one reason or another affront the senses or the sensibilities of the person involved. Exotic or unfamiliar foods may disgust (ingesting a grasshopper or a snake for many North Americans, for example), even though intrinsically these substances do not evince disgusting qualities. Foods prohibited by dietary laws may appear disgusting to those within a given culture, whereas those who regularly eat such things have a hard time understanding such reactions. Eating arouses both the affront to the senses of taste and smell that are powerful in disgust, and also epitomizes that which can contaminate, for taking a disgusting object into one's body is the most intimate sort of contact and therefore one of the most dangerously polluting.

But Kolnai also notes that there is a spectrum of flavors moving from the attractive to the disgusting, so that by moving along this spectrum attraction may tilt over into aversion—or vice versa. He has in mind the example of high or gamy meat, which is deliberately left unprepared until decay sets in, heightening the fleshy taste and

achieving a state of *haut goût*, or 'high flavor'. Strong, ripe cheese has the same effect: the production of a sense experience that skirts the edge of the revolting but is thereby rendered—not marginally acceptable—but actually *better* than the substance would be in a less advanced state. "A slight putrefaction still does not suppress the specific smell and taste of the material in question, but indeed accentuates them to an extent which makes them even more characteristic—the phenomenon of *haut goût*."

The example of *haut goût* is raised several times in Kolnai's essay to account for the paradoxical nature of disgust. The revolting object exerts a certain "macabre attraction" over the subject, leading to a peculiar absorption in the object and lending a magnetism to this aversion. This is Kolnai's route to understanding the apparent element of desire that operates in tandem with aversion in the experience of disgust, a subject of extensive speculation on the part of psychoanalysts as well. Freud, for example, considered disgust a reaction formation that inhibited a subject from acting upon repressed sexual desires. But Kolnai rejects what he considers the 'reductionism' of psychoanalysis. As a good phenomenologist, he prefers instead to direct his analysis of emotions to the conscious regions, whose complexity amply repays attention and, if we are sensitive to the nuances of experience, affords all the answers that we need. Nonetheless, Kolnai appreciates the psychoanalytic recognition of what even he calls the "eroticism of disgust," a breed of aversion which is superimposed "upon the shadow of a desire for union with the object"; this magnetism of the disgusting, as we have seen, is one of its hallmarks. Rather than probing the unconscious, however, Kolnai holds that it is the conscious examination of excessive sensory experiences themselves which suggests the conversion of an attraction into an aversion that still retains traces of the attraction. Think how the paradigm of attraction in taste experience—the sweet—can quickly reach surfeit; and how when indulgence persists, that surfeit cloys and revolts. Here even on a simple sensory level we can see the structure of the disgusting in play. Kolnai's observations here thus anticipate Miller's longer discussion of the varieties of surfeit, both gustatory and sexual.³⁶ Excessive indulgence of the sensory pleasures is one of the most easily understood conversions of attraction into aversion, and it provides another way to understand Freud's observation that disgust and other reaction formations,

including shame and indeed the whole of morality itself, form a crucial curb to the expenditure of human energies in the pursuit of sensuous indulgence. As Kolnai somewhat wryly puts it, disgust prevents us from drowning in pleasure.

Disgust and Moral Apprehension

The most vivid exemplars of material disgust—putrefaction, excessive fecundity without structure, and so on—furnish the language we use to describe the response of disgust that we experience when we encounter morally repugnant persons or situations. Kolnai takes this to indicate something even deeper than linguistic practice: that moral disgust is an important part of an ethical sensibility. It helps us to grasp and to feel aversion towards certain character and behavior flaws (slimy characters, creepy gestures) that require serious attention. But Kolnai's extension of material disgust into the regions of moral judgment has some idiosyncratic elements.

As one might expect, sex figures prominently among those categories of behavior that can be perverted into what is disgusting. The extension of that which is sweet into that which satiates in a disgusting fashion reminds Kolnai of incest, in which love and attraction have outgrown their proper boundaries and become excessive, perverted. The gastric paradigm extends to excessive vitality of other sorts, which are again especially manifest in sexual indulgence. But this is no mere somatophobia on Kolnai's part. Excessive spirituality is just as apt to arouse disgust as is excessive sexuality, and Kolnai (for all his commitment to Catholicism) is no more forgiving of an overabundance of piety than of the lapses of a libertine. Both fail to honor moderation; they flow over and beyond their proper proportions and grow unbalanced. The ensuing loss of structure brings about a squishy inertness liable to grow all manner of moral fungus.

A number of questions may be raised about Kolnai's extension of his analysis of visceral, sensory disgust to morally salient responses. One of the features of the emotion of disgust is its immediacy; unlike contempt (to which it stands in marked contrast), it is not founded on any studied judgment about the moral adequacy of its object. Rather, disgust can itself ground the negative judgment. Disgust is more like a sensitivity to corruption, a sensitivity that is

palpable in the case of visceral responses to decay and putrefaction, and that Kolnai sees operating in the moral realm as well. Some readers may consider this expansion unwarranted, or perhaps assume that Kolnai intended a merely metaphorical extension of the language of disgust to the domain of moral judgments. This, however, would fail to do justice to Kolnai's perspective. He regards the capacity to feel disgust to be a matter of our human reactivity not only to decay and foulness in the sensory realm, but also to moral decay and foulness of character. Disgust, he holds, is an indispensable foundation of our ethical sensibility. Granted, it cannot stand alone: that is, it cannot by itself justify moral condemnation; and there are circumstances that positively require that disgust be overcome. But without the responsiveness of disgust, ethical discernment is withered and impoverished. The degree to which he sees in disgust a moral sensitivity to qualities of personal wrongdoing and corrupt character bears witness to Kolnai's moral realism. But even a committed realist may be taken aback at some of the examples of objects of moral disgust that Kolnai advances, such as the case of a soldier questioning the orders of a superior officer. (Both Elisabeth Gombrich and Elizabeth Kolnai, who drafted earlier English versions of 'Der Ekel' in the period after World War II, glossed over this example in their translations. It is hard not to read in this some shared doubt concerning Aurel Kolnai's estimate of the scope of moral disgust.)

Although Kolnai treats disgust as at least a reliable starting point for moral condemnation, other theorists are more cautious. William Ian Miller and Martha Nussbaum both note the dangerous quality of disgust, which not only recoils from but degrades its object, indicating the peculiar power of this emotion. They have in mind the origin of this emotion in responses to material objects and their sensible features; as Miller puts it "Disgust makes beauty and ugliness a matter of morals."³⁷ Nussbaum is even more wary, arguing that the content of disgust is always of dubious reliability and has no place in social norms, especially those sanctioned and enforced by law.³⁸ She observes how frequently the attribute of the disgusting has been attached to social minorities or disempowered groups such as Jews, homosexuals, even women. Disgust has thus served as a tool of injustice by discrediting and condemning the distasteful persons and behavior of others, and has rendered that condemnation all the

more powerful by its origin in a strong emotive response. Kolnai does not address this problem extensively, though it is doubtful that this is the use (or misuse) of disgust that he has in mind when he treats disgust as a foundation for moral judgment. Sexual behavior, because of its bodily character, seems to straddle both his categories of the materially and the morally disgusting, and since the former is viscerally so immediate it can lend the latter particularly recalcitrant strength. Nussbaum sees disgust as functioning especially vigorously in the oppression of homosexuals; Miller agrees with Freud that sex of any kind is always disgusting and that initial revulsion must be overcome by love. Kolnai was clearly quite conservative, though not notably squeamish, in his views about sex; several times he mentions unwanted sexual advances—especially male homosexual advances—as examples of disgusting proximity.³⁹

Above all, an unreliability of character marks the domain of the morally disgusting, indicating a borderland where firm principles are lost to vacillating whim and to an obsequious accommodation to circumstance. The notion of excess—which implies the presence of a trait that is good at the start but grows out of control and loses its proper structure and boundaries—is at the heart of general moral softness, or of that moral spinelessness that admits virtually anything because it lacks any principles or values of its own. Kolnai hates what he calls “excessive sentimentality,” and he expresses this distaste with a vigor that is unexpected given what one might take to be the relative harmlessness of sentimental indulgences, for example as displayed in Kolnai’s own favorite case: the emotional blandishments of nineteenth-century Russian literature.⁴⁰ Kolnai assails sentimentality for its disparity between the value content of its object and the “stupefying exuberance” of the emotive response; he likens it to a kind of moral *haut goût*, a deliberate cultivation of a taste to a point of perversity. Kolnai notes that even in childhood he was inclined to hate “not only wrong but rosy illusions,” and surely rosy illusions are a pitfall of sentimentality.⁴¹ What seems a rather idiosyncratic section of Kolnai’s essay might be placed in a more comprehensible context if we bear in mind his own political experience in the period between the writing of the two essays printed here. As we saw above, Kolnai experienced the emotive as well as the political excesses of National Socialism at first hand in the years before he began his circuitous route to exile in North America and England. Excessive sen-

timentality is an emotional distortion of the value of an intentional object and is the soil for profound moral failings that can have the most far-reaching consequences. Indeed, Kolnai’s attack on sentimentality and its dangers is reiterated in the later ‘Standard Modes of Aversion’.

A misapprehension of the true nature of an object, event, or situation connects with the other categories of moral disgust: lies, falsehood, betrayal—corruption of the truth in all its forms. Kolnai employs some of his most intense and colorful language in the description of a lie as a “wormlike, crookedly hidden aggressiveness,” one that presses upon the lied-to with yet another brand of disgusting proximity. The lie is also a sort of excess, another brand of vitality put to perverse ends, “swimming in vital matter which is at odds with itself.” Betrayal, corruption—all these are interpreted as varieties of misdirected life, of surplus vitality resulting in the decay of character.

Excess, redundancy, loss of proper structure in life all form a ‘metaphysical datum’ that lies at the root of the disgusting. This by no means implies that disgust is a route to moral or normative certainty; in his caution here, Kolnai would agree with Nussbaum. There are situations in which it is morally requisite to overcome initial disgust and readjust one’s assessment of a situation. At the same time, disgust is attuned to certain values, a way to discover those real properties that the world presents. (Kolnai follows Meinong and Scheler in their recognition of the real properties of value of which only emotions can provide insight.)⁴² Of course disgust may be misdirected. It requires reflection and assessment, as do judgments of reason. Just as impressions of the senses may mislead, so emotions are not free from error. Yet this does not obviate the importance of disgust as a gauge and measure of qualities and values in the world.