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DISGUST

WILLIAM IAN MILLER



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PROLOGUE

DISGUST RAISES SPECIAL PROBLEMS for an author that closely related topics such as, say, sex do not. People are willing to take sex seriously even as they are vaguely titillated by doing so. Convention has come to accord sex and sexuality an almost sacred seriousness—sex because of its occasional link to love, and sexuality because of its supposed role in the definition of personhood and identity. Disgust, however, still demands justification as a serious topic and a permissible one. Disgust invites discussions of unmentionables that tend to undercut certain pretensions and pieties we like to maintain about sex, presentability, and human dignity in general.

There is thus a problem of tone that I have struggled with in this book: how to maintain decorum without seeming prissy. Prissiness runs the risk of introducing the vulgar comedy one is seeking to avoid. But the very mention of some subjects, necessary subjects if we are to face up to the substance and structures of the disgusting, prompts either disgust itself or low comedy. The comic and the disgusting, we know, share significant points of contact. I have tried to maintain decorum without also becoming boring or silly, erring I think on the prissy side.

I do not intend to shock, although I recognize that shocking may not be completely avoidable given the nature of disgust and the disgusting. While one need not be boring to describe boredom, nor confusing to describe confusion, it just may be that the so-called fallacy of imitative form is not completely fallacious when it comes to disgust. Unlike descriptions of boredom and confusion, descriptions of the disgusting have suggestive powers that work independently of an author's will. And so although I have no wish to disgust

you, I cannot promise that you will not be at times disgusted. In the end, the subject is a serious one, implicating our moral sensibility, love, politics, and our sense of self.

In many of its forms disgust is not simply aversive, and the content of the disgusting is complex and at times paradoxical. It is a commonplace that the disgusting can attract as well as repel; the film and entertainment industries, among which we might include news coverage, literally bank on its allure. The disgusting is an insistent feature of the lurid and the sensational, informed as these are by sex, violence, horror, and the violation of norms of modesty and decorum. And even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing “double-takes” at the very things that disgust us.

It would be disingenuous of me to deny that the disgusting fascinates me for the same reasons it prompts double-takes in everyone else, but I can also claim wholesome warrant for this enterprise. First, I have been interested for some time in the emotions, especially those which rank us in moral and social hierarchies. In my book *Humiliation* (1993) I took the vantage point of the person accepting or resisting reassignment to a lower status in the relevant social and moral ordering. The crucial passions were shame, embarrassment, humiliation, and vengefulness. This book is the flip side. Here I look at the emotions—disgust mostly, but also contempt—that confirm others as belonging to a lower status and thus in the zero-sum game of rank necessarily define oneself as higher. The emotions that constitute our experience of being lower or lowered—shame and humiliation—exist in a rough economy with those passions which are the experience of reacting to the lowly, failed, and contaminating—disgust and contempt.

Both this book and *Humiliation* run counter to some of the dominant strands in Western social thought over the past three centuries, which try to explain most social action by reference to self-interest, greed, or a psychologically thin notion of the quest for power. My own sensibility drives me to a more anxiety-ridden account, privileging defensive and reactive passions, such as humiliation and dis-

gust, at the expense of more offensive and assertive ones. Nevertheless, these lowly passions help preserve our dignity, in fact enable the very possibility of dignity, often at great cost to our more acquisitive and purely egoistic designs.

Second, love bears a complex and possibly necessary relation to disgust. Doesn't love (sexual and non-sexual) involve a notable and non-trivial suspension of some, if not all, rules of disgust? Disgust rules mark the boundaries of self; the relaxing of them marks privilege, intimacy, duty, and caring. Disgust also figures in the attractions and repulsions of the sexual, which from time to time is also an aspect of love. In the sexual setting disgust's relation to love is more complex, involving us in the pleasure that attends the breach of prohibitions. But the connection between disgust and the sexual comes as less of a surprise; the knowledge of such a connection, after all, lies at the core of much of the Freudian enterprise as well as of the traditions of ascetic, Stoic, Christian, and other anti-sexual discourses.

Third, except for the highest-toned discourses of moral philosophers, moral judgment seems almost to demand the idiom of disgust. *That makes me sick. What revolting behavior! You give me the creeps.* Notice that anger and indignation can much more readily make use of the idiom of disgust than disgust can make use of anger's diction. Why is it that disgust figures so prominently in routine moral discourse, even more so perhaps than the idioms of other moral emotions such as guilt and indignation? This is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it confined to English. The entire Latin Christian discourse of sin depended on the conceptualization of sin and hell as raising excremental stench and loathsome prospects. And recent social-psychological work has revealed disgust's crucial role in the expression of moral judgments across a wide spectrum of cultures.

Fourth, in this book, as in *Humiliation*, I lament the loss during the nineteenth century of the centrality of a certain way of talking about human motivation, a loss that attended the breaking off of a specialized discipline of psychology and psychiatry from moral philosophy, literature, and history. Expertise in psychology came to be claimed by and/or accorded nearly exclusively to formally trained psychologists and psychotherapists. Science brought undeniable

gains, but at a heavy cost to a certain depth in psychological (and by extension, moral) discourse. Something very valuable has been lost to us. And in comparison with that pre-professional style of the likes of Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, or Jane Austen, can we say with confidence that the often dazzling intellectual tours de force carried out in various Freudian idioms are not in the end chillingly restrictive, reducing as they do so much variety to mere veneering on their underlying oedipal master narrative? One suspects the poets, novelists, and moral philosophers of our era must overcome much more to be as psychologically insightful as they might have been had they lived in that earlier age.

This book is thus consciously conceived as a meditation on disgust in the tradition of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, written in the early seventeenth century. I see the book as an homage to a time when, in a strange way, psychology was less constricted than it is now. In that time it was about virtues and vices, narratives both fictional and historical, about how one stood with others as much as how one stood with oneself. The psychological was not yet divorced either from the moral or from the social. The book is thus methodologically promiscuous as a methodological commitment, drawing on history, literature, moral philosophy, and psychology. My goal is to develop further the kind of social and micro-political theory that is most often associated with the work of Erving Goffman. By adding emotion—here disgust and contempt—we can enrich the strangely unmotivated world of Goffman's sometimes paranoid social actors.

Fifth, though arguing that disgust can resist culture to some degree, I detail the interpretively rich universe of the disgusting. Here we have the most embodied and visceral of emotions, and yet even when it is operating in and around the body, its orifices and excreta, a world of meaning explodes, coloring, vivifying, and contaminating political, social, and moral orderings. Disgust for all its visceralness turns out to be one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions. This work, however, is manifestly not a body book in the style of that recent and trendy academic genre. Nothing gets “inscribed” on the body here except the tattoos I allude to in my discussion of contempt.

I also make what in the humanities has come to be considered the

unthinkable move of taking academic psychology seriously in spite of the limitations of its willfully non-interpretive style. I intend this book to reach across disciplines and even to make some small breaches in the monstrously thick wall that divides the academic and non-academic worlds. In the end this anatomy should engage Foucauldians as well as "normal people." For the former I offer an anatomy which looks remarkably similar to a genealogy of disgust. For the latter I offer the belief that matter matters and that only polemical foolishness will allow us to ignore the fact that some of our emotions generate culture as well as being generated by it. Needless to say there are risks involved in ranging as widely as I attempt to do here, the main one being that I am not formally trained in many of the areas the discussion must engage. My areas of expertise tend toward the literary and historical, but by curious twists the questions that my earlier work on honor and the heroic have raised have pushed me on to terrain that has already been colonized by psychologists, moral philosophers, and political and social theorists. I must ask for some indulgence from the experts in those fields, although I hope not too much will be needed.

The pronoun I, you, one, she, he, we, choose(s) to privilege in exposition is now a matter fraught with political and moral implications. One may wish these matters would go away, but they do not appear likely to do so in the near future. So some remarks are in order. In much of my exposition I adopt what I would like to call an "invitational we." The "we" is not a royal me; it is not me trying to escape responsibility for personal claims or grant my personal claims spurious authority by claiming them the norm. "We" is the voice of attempted sympathy and imagination, of a mediational position of extrapolating from others' and my own observations of the various traditions that have gone into constructing our broad understandings of disgust, of contempt, and of the disgusting and the contemptible. The "we" invites you to suspend local commitments on occasion and entertain what I believe will be a position that, if not exactly yours and not exactly mine, will at least be understandable, conceivable, and recognizable.

One of the big problems with writing about disgust is that sex (and less frequently, sexuality) unavoidably must be part of the exposition. While I seem reasonably confident with the emotions that manage our public selves—shame, humiliation, and embarrassment—Eros and sexual cupidity embarrass me. Furthermore, gender differences, orientations, and individual preferences in the experience of sexuality may pose more of a barrier to sympathetic imagining than areas less politically charged. I do think there is a common ground of recognizability even here, more than it is at present fashionable to admit. Disgust and contempt motivate and sustain the low ranking of things, people, and actions deemed disgusting and contemptible. These emotions are thus blamed more than praised, although the very blame they receive is often motivated by disgust operating in its moral register. Contempt and disgust have their necessary roles to play in a good, but not perfect, social order.

One last preemptive maneuver: the linking of disgust and sex was a central feature of the moral discourse of the Christian world. This discourse's anti-sexuality was informed by a gloomy and foul-spirited misogyny which in turn was driven by a more generalized misanthropy. I wish to distance myself from the misogyny but I am not sure if it is possible to distance myself from the misanthropy. Disgust and misanthropy seem to have an almost inevitable association, for which I call the grand and desperate Jonathan Swift to witness. Humans are most likely the only species that experiences disgust, and we seem to be the only one that is capable of loathing its own species. We also seem driven to aspire to purity and perfection. And fueling no small part of those aspirations is disgust with what we are or with what we are likely to slide back into. As we shall see, ultimately the basis for all disgust is *us*—that we live and die and that the process is a messy one emitting substances and odors that make us doubt ourselves and fear our neighbors.

I have some debts of gratitude to pay. My wife, Kathy Koehler, was my harshest critic and wished me, quite clearly, back in the world of my prior researches, the world of honor, blood, and revenge of the Icelandic sagas where, despite the violence, things were more deco-

rous and my interests were less embarrassing. More than any other, she forces me to clarify my exposition and get it right. My four children aged one to nine years contributed more to this book than they will know for quite some time. My brother-in-law, Eric Nuetzel, a committed Freudian and a practicing psychoanalyst, saved me from several gaffes when my general suspiciousness of and hostility to the reductionism of depth psychology threatened to obscure my better judgment. Liz Anderson, Nora Bartlett, Rob Bartlett, Carol Clover, Laura Croley, Heidi Feldman, Rick Hills, Orit Kamir, Rick Pildes, Robert Solomon, Susan Thomas, Stephen D. White, and Lara Zuckert made useful bibliographic, stylistic, and substantive suggestions. My colleague Phoebe Ellsworth was especially helpful in guiding me through the world of experimental psychology, and her penetrating intelligence saved me several times from errors and sillinesses.

My greatest debt is to my colleague and friend Don Herzog. We share many intellectual interests and also, it seems, certain habits of mind. Much of the substance of this book was filtered through conversations with Don, and his mark is present in more than a few places. In some respects the present organization of the book is his idea; if it is still not to the taste of everyone, it would have been to the taste of even fewer had I not adopted his suggestions. Here form requires that I accept all responsibility for the shape of this book and I do, but the suggestion that Don might be liable for some blame seems to be a necessary correlate to being eligible for praise.

An early and shorter version of Chapter 9 appeared as "Upward Contempt" in *Political Theory* 23 (1995): 476–499; it is reprinted by permission of Sage Publications.

Gloucester: O, let me kiss that hand!

Lear: Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.

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DARWIN'S DISGUST

MODERN PSYCHOLOGICAL INTEREST in disgust starts with Darwin, who centers it in the rejection of food and the sense of taste. Consider his account:

The term "disgust," in its simplest sense, means something offensive to the taste. It is curious how readily this feeling is excited by anything unusual in the appearance, odour, or nature of our food. In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty. A smear of soup on a man's beard looks disgusting, though there is of course nothing disgusting in the soup itself. I presume that this follows from the strong association in our minds between the sight of food, however circumstanced, and the idea of eating it.¹

Darwin is right about the etymology of disgust. It means unpleasant to the taste.² But one wonders whether taste would figure so crucially in Darwin's account if the etymology hadn't suggested it. The German *Ekel*, for instance, bears no easily discernible connection to taste. Did that make it easier for Freud to link disgust as readily with the anal and genital as with the oral zone?³ I suspect that the English word is in some unquantifiable way responsible for the narrow focus on taste, oral incorporation, and rejection of food in psychological treatments of disgust.⁴ Before the word disgust entered the English lexicon in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, taste figured distinctly less prominently than foul odors and loathsome sights.

Disgust undoubtedly involves taste, but it also involves—not just by extension but at its core—smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing. Above all, it is a moral and social sentiment. It plays a motivating and confirming role in moral judgment in a particular way that has little if any connection with ideas of oral incorporation.⁵ It ranks people and things in a kind of cosmic ordering.

This book is more than an anatomy of a narrow reading of the word disgust. I use the word to indicate a complex sentiment that can be lexically marked in English by expressions declaring things or actions to be repulsive, revolting, or giving rise to reactions described as revulsion and abhorrence as well as disgust.⁶ Disgust names a syndrome in which all these terms have their proper role. They all convey a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion. All suggest the appropriateness, but not the necessity, of accompanying nausea or queasiness, or of an urge to recoil and shudder from creepiness.

Disgust, however, is not nausea. Not all disgust need produce symptoms of nausea, nor all nausea mark the presence of disgust. The nausea of the stomach flu is not a sign or consequence of disgust, although, should we vomit as a result, the vomiting and the vomit might themselves lead to sensations of disgust that would be distinguishable from the nausea that preceded it. The nausea of a hangover, however, is more complex, accompanied as it often is by feelings of contamination, poisoning, and self-disgust, as well as shame and embarrassment. On the other side, things or deeds we find disgusting put us in the world of disgust when we have the sense that we would not be surprised should we start feeling queasy or nauseated, whether or not we actually do so. Disgust surely has a feel to it; that feel, however, is not so much of nausea as of the uneasiness, the panic, of varying intensity, that attends the awareness of being defiled.

Let us put that aside for now and look more closely at the passage from Darwin. Is it food and taste that elicit disgust as a first-order matter?

In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly

showed disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty.

In this passage, long before food ever reaches a mouth to raise the issue of its taste, we have suggestions of other categories that implicate disgust: categories of tactility as in cold (meat) vs. hot, soft vs. firm; overt categories of purity such as raw vs. cooked, dirty vs. clean; categories of bodily shame, naked vs. clothed; and broader categories of group definition, Tierra del Fuego vs. England, them vs. us. For the native, it is not ultimately the softness of the preserved meat so much as what eating it means about the person eating it. For Darwin, it is not just that someone touched his food (with clean hands no less), but that the person doing the touching was a *naked savage* who had already offended him. In the first clause the savage is merely a curious native in the two senses of curious: curious because strange and curious subjectively as a dispositional trait that makes him poke at Darwin's food. But once he finds Darwin's food disgusting, Darwin redescribes him downward as a naked savage capable of polluting his food. Before this interaction Darwin could look at the native with the contempt of bemusement or indifference or with a kind of benign contempt that often is itself a component of curiosity. The native, however, gets too close and gives real offense, and the inkling of threat is enough to transform a complacent contempt into disgust.

Would Darwin have been as disgusted by the native touching his food if the native had not insulted it by registering his revulsion? Or had the native already discerned Darwin's disgust for him and decided to use it to toy with him by touching his food? Would Darwin have been less disgusted if the native had touched him rather than his food? Food plays a role here, to be sure, and both actors share a deep belief that you pretty much are what you eat. The native recoils at the idea of what manner of man could eat such stuff, whereas Darwin fears ingesting some essence of savagery that has been magically imparted to his food by the finger of the naked savage. But oral ingestion is put in play here only because food is acting as one of a number of possible media by which pollution could be transferred. The issue is the doubts and fears each man's presence elicits

in the other and the little battle for security and dominance by which they seek to resolve it; it is a battle of competing disgusts.

Less loaded with politics is the smear of soup on a man's beard, "though there is of course nothing disgusting in the soup itself." Again it is not food that is disgusting; Darwin's own explanation says it only becomes disgusting by the "strong association . . . between the sight of food . . . and the idea of eating it." But this can't be right. The sight of the man with his beard befouled is disgusting long before any idea of eating the soup on his beard ever would, if ever it could, occur to us. The association of ideas is not of seeing food in a beard and then imagining eating that food. If the soup is disgusting as food, it is so only because beard hair would be in it. Now that *is* disgusting. We could see this, in accordance with the structural theory of Mary Douglas, as a manifestation of things becoming polluting by being out of place.⁷ That captures some of the problem but doesn't explain the sense that it is more the hair than the soup, more the man than the food, that elicits disgust. The soup on the beard reveals the man as already contaminated by a character defect, a moral failure in keeping himself presentable in accordance with the righteously presented demand that he maintain his public purity and cleanliness of person and not endanger us by his incompetence. It needn't have been soup or bread crumbs that incriminated him; it could just as well have been bits of lint or even soap residue. No doubt, however, the soup would be more disgusting than either lint or soap. The soup, after all, unlike lint or soap, might have fallen onto his beard from his mouth or from a spoon that had already been in his mouth. It is thus not our fear of oral incorporation that makes the soup disgusting to us but his failure to have properly orally incorporated it.

Yet suppose that it was not a naked savage who touched Darwin's meat but a cockroach that walked across it. Would the issue then be one primarily of ingesting food? Even here I think the matter is more complex. A roach walking across our arm would elicit disgust too and perhaps even more than if it walked across our food, and we are not about to eat our arm. The roach (and the naked savage) is disgusting before it touches our food; its contaminating powers come from some other source.

Disgust has elicited little attention in any of the disciplines that claim an interest in the emotions: psychology, philosophy, anthropology. It is not hard to guess the likely reason. The problem is its lack of decorum. Civilization raised our sensitivities to disgust so as to make disgust a key component of our social control and psychic order, with the consequence that it became socially and psychically very difficult for civilized people to talk about disgusting things without having the excuse of either childhood, adolescence, or transgressive joking. Other negative passions—envy, hatred, malice, jealousy, despair—can be discussed decorously. Talking about them need elicit no blushes, no urges to giggle, no shock, no gorge raising. They do not force upon us the grotesque body, unrelenting physical ugliness, nauseating sights and odors; no suppuration, defecation, or rot. The sinful and vicious soul, in other words, is a lot easier to own up to than the grotesque body and the sensory offenses that life itself thrusts upon us.

One scholar studying disgust recently complained that “contact with the disgusting makes one disgusting. To study disgust is to risk contamination; jokes about his or her unwholesome interests soon greet the disgust researcher.”⁸ And indeed it is hard to suppress ironic suggestions which seem necessarily to intrude when one commits oneself to a project such as this one. Darwin was the first to risk studying disgust in its own right. Evincing neither overt anxiety nor irony, he nonetheless limited his risk by keeping the discussion very brief, not even five pages. Freud was more expansive; he lumped disgust with shame and morality, treating them as “reaction formations,” whose function it is to inhibit the consummation of unconscious desire; indeed reaction formations are part of the mechanism of repression that makes the desire unconscious.⁹ Freud did not give disgust much direct attention except generally as a reaction formation. But without disgust lurking about, one suspects, his oeuvre would have been half as long. What else, after all, makes sex so difficult, so frequently the basis for anxiety, neurosis, and psychosis? One might suspect that Freud’s theories are themselves grand efforts to overcome a deep disgust with sex.

Until the last decade or so there was little else of much interest except for one superb article, straddling both psychological and psy-