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Taylor & Francis Group

Australasian Journal of Philosophy

ISSN: 0004-8402 (Print) 1471-6828 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajp20

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To cite this article: Iskra Fileva (2020): You Disgust Me. Or Do You? On the Very Idea of Moral Disgust, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, DOI: 10.1080/00048402.2020.1717560

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2020.1717560

AUSTRALASIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2020.1717560

You Disgust Me. Or Do You? On the Very Idea of Moral Disgust

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ABSTRACT
It has been argued that so-called moral disgust is either not really moral or not really disgust. I maintain that sceptics are wrong: there is a distinct emotional response best described as 'moral disgust'. I offer an account of its constitutive features.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 8 May 2019; Revised 4 January 2020

KEYWORDS disgust; moral disgust; moral disgust scepticism; disgust-as-metaphor

1. Introduction

Consider Paul, a man who steals money left by his parents for his new-born baby and who squanders it on gambling and alcohol. Imagine further that Mark, a concerned relative who learns of this, says to Paul, 'You disgust me'. What does Mark mean when he says that?

One possible answer is that Mark means just what he says: he is disgusted—that is, Paul's behaviour has induced in him the same affective state that mouldy bread might induce. This possibility has been called the Moral Dyspepsia Hypothesis.[1] Another possible answer is that Mark is not disgusted; rather, he speaks metaphorically. The disgust that he feels is like the stench that a person may be said to sense when in the presence of another who is said to 'reek of infidelity'. This option is compatible with Mark's having *some* negative affective response—perhaps anger, outrage, dismay, strong disapproval, or something else—but not really disgust.[2] Similarly, the person who says that another 'reeks of infidelity' may be experiencing *something* in the presence of the other—distrust, disapproval, and so on—but not a bad smell.

The 'disgust-as-metaphor' interpretation has many champions. For instance, Royzman and Sabini [2001] write thus:

> we want to propose that the claim of our being 'disgusted' by people revealing deep and seemingly inhuman 'characterological flaws' (Rozin, Haidt, McCauley, 1999, p. 436; Miller, 1997) may sound plausible only because of the temptation to take the self-reported use of the term as being a literal depiction of the experiential ordeal of a 'morally disgusted' person. The likely alternative is that in cases such as these the term 'disgust' is applied metaphorically

[1] The label comes from Royzman, Leeman, and Sabini [2008]. The literal reading has been defended by Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley [1999], Kelly [2011], and Kumar [2017].

[2] Nabi [2002] suggests that 'disgust' in common parlance refers both to core disgust and to states such as anger and irritation. Nabi argues that this gap between the 'theoretical' and the 'lay' meaning of disgust undermines arguments to the effect that disgust has socio-moral varieties in addition to the physical ones.

> and strategically to encompass a variety of other non-sensorial elicitors, including socio-moral offenses, with the two types of experiences having little or no phenomenological common ground. In the same vein, we may be momentarily tempted to treat the phenomenology of 'sweet' in 'sweet taste' as compatible with that of 'sweet' in 'she has a sweet nature'.

To suppose that these two options—the literal reading (on which moral disgust is the same as physical disgust) and the metaphorical reading—exhaust the list of options, and that the second interpretation is true (in all relevant cases), is to adopt a sceptical position with regard to moral disgust.[3] The argument for scepticism goes something like this:

> *Premise 1*. Moral disgust, if it exists, would be the same as physical or core disgust, but it would have a moral trigger.
>
> *Premise 2*. There are no cases of physical disgust with a purely moral trigger.
>
> *Conclusion*. Moral disgust proper does not exist.

This is my formulation of the argument, but it captures the reasoning that proponents of the metaphorical reading have in mind, since the assumption that we face a binary choice—understand 'disgust' as core disgust, or else see expression as a metaphor—is implicit in their arguments. What I wish to argue here is that the sceptical argument, as just formulated, fails. I will suggest that there are problems with every step of the argument. Premise 2 is false because core disgust *can* have a purely moral trigger. Premise 1 is false because core disgust with a moral trigger is *not* moral disgust. The conclusion is false because there is a good candidate for the label 'moral disgust': moral disgust is a distinctive moral emotion. This emotion's phenomenology bears a close resemblance, but is not identical, to the phenomenology of physical disgust. At least sometimes, we are not speaking metaphorically when we say that we are morally disgusted, although we are not saying that we are physically disgusted. I will suggest further that once the nature of moral disgust is properly understood, it will emerge that there is a *prima facie* reason to grant authority to moral disgust.

If my argument succeeds, we will have an answer to two different and very important challenges to moral disgust proponents, issued recently by Alberto Giubilini [2016]. He argues, first, that, even if physical disgust with a moral trigger exists, that disgust may not have moral authority. For consider how we can *know* that something disgusting that we judge to be morally wrong is, indeed, morally wrong. If the answer is simply that the disgusting thing is wrong because it is disgusting, then we have a circular argument.[4] If, on the other hand, we have an independent reason to think that what disgusts us is morally wrong, then disgust becomes redundant: it does not serve as a moral guide; rather, the independent reason to believe that the disgusting something is wrong is the guide. As I will endeavour to show here, these are very serious problems for the view that moral disgust is physical disgust, but that view is mistaken. Moral disgust, I will suggest, is a distinct moral emotion, and it has the sort of defeasible moral authority that other moral emotions have.

Second, Giubilini suggests that the notion of 'moral disgust' is too obscure and used to refer to a class of disparate cases. In light of this, he urges us to avoid using

[3] See Royzman and Sabini [2001], Royzman and Kurzban [2011a, 2011b], and Gert [2015]. Bollard [manuscript] defends a sceptical view as well. Note that Bollard's view is more nuanced: she argues that moral disgust must not simply have a moral trigger but be a response to 'moral violations … as such' [ibid.: 4].

[4] Giubilini [2016: 235] suggests that the arguments given by Kekes for the moral authority of disgust are circular in just this way.

the expression until we've clarified what we mean by it. Since I intend not simply to argue that moral disgust exists but also to explain what it is, if I am right then Giubilini's worries—and not only those of sceptics from the 'disgust-as-metaphor' camp—can be assuaged.

2. Background

Before I take on the sceptical argument, I wish to place my inquiry in context. Discussants in the moral disgust debate generally have two different things in mind when they speak of moral disgust—disgust that influences moral judgment and disgust that's caused by a moral judgment.[5]

Numerous recent studies suggest that disgust may influence moral judgment. These influences may be completely extraneous: for example, sweet-tasting substances were found to trigger favourable judgments about other people [Eskine, Kacinic, and Prinz 2011: 295–9], and a badly smelling room contributed to harsher moral judgments [Schnall et al. 2008: 1096–109]. Or they may not be extraneous, as in the case of negative judgments about homosexuality [Inbar et al. 2009: 435–9], cloning [Kass 2014], and so on. Among those who agree that physical disgust can influence moral judgments, some think that it does this appropriately [Kass 1997; Kekes 1998; Demetriou 2013; Kumar 2017; Plakias 2018], while others argue it does this inappropriately [Greene 2008; Nussbaum 2010; Kelly 2011; Freiman and Lerner 2015]. On the other hand, some of the disgust studies have failed to replicate.[6]

What of disgust caused by a moral judgment? According to the sceptical argument, this type of disgust does not exist. In what follows, I review some of the arguments that others have given for, and against, the existence of disgust with a moral trigger.

3. Is There Physical Disgust Caused by a Moral Appraisal?

3.1 Arguments in the Existing Literature

3.1.1 Facial Expressions

One avenue that we might take in attempting to discover whether there is disgust with a purely moral trigger is this: we first operationalize disgust—that is, find some observable state that reliably indicates the presence of disgust. Facial expressions are a good candidate here. While there is some disagreement about what a disgust face looks like, the main components appear to be these—gape, retraction of the upper lip, and wrinkling of the nose [Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2008: 759]. If we take these to be indicative of disgust, our question becomes ths: do moral triggers ever elicit the sorts of facial expressions (or components thereof) associated with disgust?

It has been suggested that they do: moral features can trigger in participants facial expressions just like those that people make when physically disgusted.[7] Sceptics respond by saying that such facial expressions may be performative, 'strategic signals'

[5] This is why Giubilini [2016] suggests that 'moral disgust' is used in several different ways.

[6] Justin Landy and Geoffrey Goodwin [2015] note several replication failures. In light of a large-scale meta-analysis, Landy and Goodwin conclude that that the amplifying effect of disgust on moral judgment is small or non-existent. Cf. May [2014].

[7] Chapman, et al. [2009] find that unfair treatment in an economic game is associated with activation of the levator labii muscle region of the face, the same region activated in response to unpleasant tastes or photographs of contaminants. See also Chapman and Anderson [2011a].

or 'a pose', not indicators of actual disgust (see Royzman and Kurzban [2011b] and Chapman and Anderson [2011b: 272–3]. As evidence, they cite a variety of studies. In one, undergraduate students were asked to smell pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral odours. There were three experimental conditions—spontaneous, posing to real odours, and posing to imagined odours. Subjects were videotaped without their knowledge in the spontaneous condition and with their knowledge in the 'pose' conditions. Raters were then shown the videotapes and asked to guess whether the subjects smelled something pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The researchers report that in the 'covert' videotaping condition, raters were correct only 37% of the time (close to the accuracy that one would get by chance) while accuracy jumped to 76% when subjects *posed* to odours, whether real or imagined, suggesting that facial expressions are not simply reflexive but serve as signals [Gilbert, Fridlund, and Sabini 1987: 355–63]. In another study, raters were found to be much better at determining whether subjects are eating sweet or salty foods when they observed subjects eating communally rather than in solitude [Brightman et al. 1977].

The evidence from facial expressions thus lends itself to more than one interpretation and is insufficient to rule out alternative hypotheses such as the 'signalling' one [Gert 2015; Bollard manuscript].

3.1.2 Neural Activation

Perhaps we can pick an observable state that cannot be written off as a 'pose' or some kind of signal. A certain pattern of neural activation has been suggested as a suitable candidate. Moral triggers can produce patterns of neural activity associated with physical disgust—more specifically, activation of the anterior insular cortex (see Sanfey et al. [2003: 1755–8] and Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley [2008: 758]). The anterior insula is one of the two main substructures of the gustatory cortex and is involved in disgust.[8]

Joshua Gert, on behalf of the disgust sceptic, responds to this suggestion by saying that a neural state is not identical to the psychological state of disgust, although the two might be equivalent from the point of view of empirical science. Gert argues that the cognitive scientist's definition of disgust might specify nothing more than a neural pattern, but the scientific definition is not the ordinary definition, and it is the latter about which we care. Gert makes the following analogy: 'If, to your request for a glass of water, someone passed you a glass filled with ice and no water, he would simply be making a bad joke' [2015: 44]. This is so, even though the chemical composition of ice is the same as that of water.

I don't think that this response succeeds as it is, but a stronger response can be formulated.

I am sympathetic to Gert's claim that a pattern of neural activation is not identical to a subjective affective state, although physicalists would dispute this view. However, assuming supervenience of the mental on the physical (a safe assumption), we must conclude that there is some pattern of neural activation that corresponds uniquely to disgust and so can be taken to be a *reliable indicator* of the presence of disgust. The disgust proponent need not claim that a pattern of brain activity *is the same thing* as a subjective state. All that she needs is a brain state that reliably indicates the presence of disgust. Parallel considerations apply to Gert's water analogy. In the case of water,

[8] The other is the frontal operculum on the interior frontal gyrus of the frontal lobe. See Marieb and Hoehn [2008: 391–5] and Kelly [2011].

while liquid water and ice share a chemical composition, they also differ from each other at the physical level. The bonding of hydrogen atoms inside liquid water is constantly forming and breaking. Not so in the case of ice, where hydrogen bonding is strong. *Pace* Gert's argument for the limited practical use of scientific definitions, if one wanted, one *could* ask for liquid water by using the scientific definition, but the definition would have to mention the bonding between atoms; simply 'H_2O' will not do.

However, while I think that we can safely assume that there is *some* pattern of neural activation that corresponds to disgust uniquely, the neural activation patterns reported in the literature might underwrite more than one subjective state. This is where we come to the stronger response to the 'neural activation' argument. Anterior insula activity in general has been linked to a wide variety of negative states, including pain, distress, hunger, thirst, and autonomic arousal [Sanfey et al. 2003: 1756]. Evidence to the effect that anterior insula activity can be observed when people get a low-ball offer in an Ultimatum Game is interesting and suggestive, but it is far from conclusive when taken as evidence of the presence of disgust. It is possible that people are feeling disgusted when treated unfairly; it is also possible that they are in some other negative state.

If not facial expressions and neural activity, then what? Another option is to stay close to ordinary experience, and to look at phenomenology. Presumably, if a state *feels* like disgust to the person who is in that state, then (barring unusual hypotheses) it is a state of disgust.

3.1.3 Phenomenology

It has been argued that moral features can trigger emotions that are, experientially, just like physical disgust. In a striking passage, John Kekes [1998: 101] offers some examples: 'slowly disembowelling a person, being suffocated under putrefying human corpses, dismembering someone with a chain saw, slaughtering babies and bathing in their blood, or being drowned in excrement.'

But these examples seem non-ideal. The acts described have features that can, all by themselves, provoke disgust, without any help from moral properties (putrefying corpses, for instance).[9] Sceptics therefore argue that the disgust-provoking properties here are not moral (see Giubilini [2016: 235] and Bollard [manuscript]). Sceptics tend to conclude that people in the situations studied either feel genuine disgust, but the disgust doesn't have a moral trigger, or else the trigger is moral, but the emotion is not disgust proper.[10] Moral disgust, understood as disgust with a moral trigger, is, on this view, a metaphor.

I agree that none of the arguments for the existence of disgust with a moral trigger that we have considered so far is sufficiently compelling. However, there is a

[9] Royzman, Leeman, and Sabini [2008: 101], for instance, say that, to obtain evidence for the moral dyspepsia hypothesis, we need not simply have evidence that there are acts with moral features that engender disgust, but evidence that the disgust in question 'is engendered specifically by the moral properties of the stimulus in question … , rather than by some other, morally unproblematic but potentially disgusting property'.

[10] According to the argument advanced by Royzman and Sabini [2001], only affective states with abstract elicitors count as emotions. On Royzman and Sabini's reckoning, disgust's elicitors are concrete, and so disgust is not an emotion, despite having been commonly regarded as one of the basic emotions by authors such as Ekman [1980]. My own view is that core disgust is probably not an emotion even when the elicitor is abstract, as in the cases I offer here. However, *moral* disgust is an emotion.

better argument, and it involves different examples of genuine disgust with a moral elicitor.

3.2 Better Examples

I offer three cases.

3.2.1 Psychiatric Patient

Psychological and moral properties of actions and situations can cause physiological responses, including disgust (although philosophers have tended to focus on the effect of disgust on moral judgments, the causality goes in both directions). In some cases, this is indicative of a psychiatric problem. Consider a case related by psychiatrist Charles Stimson [1908: 283] in a paper entitled 'The Psychic Treatment of Nervous Disorders':

> The wife of a minister suffered much pain in the abdomen and pelvis, with nausea and occasional vomiting. Her physician advised an operation upon her appendages, and she was taken to the hospital. Upon her return, her nausea and vomiting persisted. It was at this time that I was consulted, and upon careful physical examination, I could find no cause for her serious vomiting, which had become persistent. Upon a closer examination of her condition, I found that while she had a high sense of morality, her mentality was unstable; she did not inhibit well. She was greatly concerned as to her responsibility as that of a pastor's wife, and suffered greatly at the moral depravity that existed on every hand. I explained to her how moral disgust could produce nausea and vomiting, and that if she could inhibit the impressions that came to her, she would be cured. She accepted the suggestion kindly, and after several conversations, her vomiting ceased.

If Stimson is right—and the fact that his treatment worked suggests that he probably was—the minister's wife experienced genuine disgust.

3.2.2 Black Book

In Paul Verhoeven's film *Black Book*, Ellis, a Jewish woman with dyed blonde hair (and an alias—her actual name is Rachel) is hiding from the Nazis in plain sight [*Black Book* 2007]. At one point, she attends a party at the local Nazi headquarters. At the party, she spots Günther Franken, the man responsible for the death of her parents. Franken is playing the piano. Ellis becomes physically nauseated. She goes to the bathroom and vomits. Nausea is a paradigm disgust reaction. The reaction also seems to have a moral cause: it is elicited by the wrongness of Franken's past behaviour toward Ellis's parents. There is nothing *physically* repulsive about seeing an ordinary-looking man playing the piano.[11]

[11] An anonymous referee has suggested that perhaps Ellis's reaction has nothing to do with morality and that she becomes nauseated simply because the man has caused suffering to her parents. My response is that, while Ellis might not make a moral judgment explicitly, she probably makes one implicitly. To see why, consider whether Ellis would have the same reaction if she saw the man as completely innocent of any wrongdoing. For instance, imagine that the man was helping her parents to hide from the Nazis, but he had an asthma attack that alerted the Nazis to the presence of people in the basement, and, as a result, the Nazis killed Ellis's parents. It is difficult to imagine that Ellis would have the same visceral response in that case, although the amount of suffering brought upon her parents might be the same.

3.3.3 Robert Harris

Gary Watson [2004] discusses the case of a criminal named Robert Harris. Harris and his younger brother, Daniel, take a teenager's car in order to rob a bank. Robert Harris promises the teenager to return the car, but, as the car's owner walks away, Harris shoots him. He then proceeds to take the victim's food out of the victim's bag, begins eating a hamburger, and offers Daniel an apple turnover. This causes Daniel to vomit. Robert then laughs and tells him that he is a sissy who does not 'have the stomach for it' [ibid.: 132].

Psychiatric Patient, *Black Book*, and *Robert Harris* are cases of genuine disgust with a moral trigger.[12] That it is possible for moral properties to engender physical disgust is a finding of independent interest.[13] What matters for present purposes is that Premise 2 of the sceptical argument is false: there are cases of core disgust with a moral trigger.[14]

I wish to suggest now that none of the cases mentioned is a good candidate for a *moral* disgust reaction. All of these cases are simply cases of physical disgust with a moral elicitor. To be *morally* disgusted, I will now argue, is to perceive a property as morally disgusting—that is, as *wrong in a particular way*. There are two related points to note in this regard. First, moral disgust is not simply caused or elicited by instances of moral wrongness; it is *directed* at instances of moral wrongness. It takes moral wrongness as its intentional object. Consider an analogy: my fear might be elicited by the sound of creaking floorboards, but it is not *directed* at the floorboards—that is, it is not the floorboards of which I am afraid.[15] But vomiting has a cause without having an intentional object.

Second, and relatedly, moral disgust involves a moral judgment. This can help us to distinguish not only the disgust in the cases that I mentioned, but also the disgust associated with certain taboo violations, from moral disgust proper. Consider a study reported by Royzman, Leeman, and Sabini [2008]. They find that oral inhibition—characteristic of the state of disgust—might be triggered by a negative appraisal of incest. They provide evidence for the view that the response is not due to disgust with sex in general. The case, therefore, differs from Kekes's cases, mentioned above, because the disgust elicitor is not physical. In addition, it may be thought that the moral features of incest serve not simply as a blind elicitor but as an intentional object of the disgust response, and thus that the case does not face the difficulties of *Psychiatric Patient* or *Black Book*. However, disgust with the idea of sibling incest is not necessarily moral either, because it is in principle separable from a moral judgment to the effect that incest is wrong. It is quite possible for a person to find incest 'yucky' but not immoral.[16] This creates a problem for the hypothesis that people disgusted by the

[12] As I note later, in the Robert Harris case, although the trigger is *primarily* moral, it also contains a non-moral element, one connected with the proximity of food.

[13] It provides evidence for the existence of what has been called 'exaptation mechanisms'. See Gould and Vrba [1982: 4].

[14] An anonymous referee suggests that talk of 'moral triggers' is problematic since it appears to presuppose controversial moral realism. My response is that properties need not be observer-independent in order to have causal power: for example, bad smells might make us leave the room although they only exist for creatures with certain olfactory organs. Observer-dependence, therefore, should not make us think that moral triggers are any less causally efficacious than bad smells are.

[15] I thank Jon Tresan for this point.

[16] This was the reaction of most of my students to Haidt's Mark and Julie scenario. My own reaction is similar. Less anecdotally, Haidt, Koller, and Dias [2008] report that liberals and conservatives are equally likely to be disgusted by sibling incest, but liberals do not judge the action to be morally wrong. An anonymous referee has suggested that some people's disgust with the idea of incest *might* be moral. I agree: if the disgust is inseparable from a

idea of sibling incest are bound to feel moral disgust. Genuinely moral disgust involves moral appraisal. To anticipate, the morally disgusting is similar to the morally ugly. If I told you that some deed was morally ugly but not at all morally defective, you would wonder what I was talking about. The same goes for the morally disgusting: it, too, cannot be seen as separable from moral defectiveness. This is why disgust with the idea of incest need not, properly speaking, be moral disgust, even though it might cause a moral judgment to the effect that incest is wrong.

None of this is to suggest that moral disgust is *nothing but* a moral judgment, but it is to say that there cannot be genuinely moral disgust *without* a judgment—often tacit—to the effect that the disgusting thing is morally wrong, at least *pro tanto*.

There is another reason why the cases just mentioned—*Psychiatric Patient*, *Black Book*, and *Robert Harris*—are not cases of moral disgust. Physical disgust, even when it has a moral elicitor, does not have the right phenomenology. *Its* phenomenology is simply 'I am feeling sick.' Not so with moral disgust. While the morally disgusted person may say 'X made me want to puke' (and Mark, from the Paul and Mark case with which I began this paper, might say precisely that), if the moral features of an action or a person *actually* cause her to vomit, then she feels, not moral disgust, but instead physical disgust. I will say more about this shortly.

The upshot of the discussion in the present section is that Premise 1 of the sceptical argument is false as well: moral disgust is not simply physical disgust with a moral elicitor. Moral disgust differs from physical disgust in that it has an intentional object, it has a distinct phenomenology, and it necessarily involves a (usually implicit) moral judgment. In the next section, I explore these features in more detail.

4. Moral Disgust Proper

I wish to begin with the following observation: we can, in general, have an aesthetic reaction to a wide variety of objects and properties that appear, on their face, to be aesthetically neutral, as when we praise a theory for being 'elegant' or 'beautiful'. It might seem that theories are not the sorts of things that can be elegant, but we can nonetheless have a distinctly aesthetic—and not simply an intellectual—response to a theory. The phenomenology of the state that we are in when we contemplate the elegance of a theory can be expected to resemble closely that of the state we are in when we observe an elegant person, although it might engage different cognitive capacities.

We can, similarly, have an aesthetic reaction to specifically moral properties, as when we say someone is a beautiful person or that something is an ugly deed.[17] The morally disgusting is similar to the morally ugly and to the theoretically beautiful. Interestingly, there are no professed sceptics of moral beauty and ugliness or of the beauty and elegance of theories. No one says that when we call a theory 'beautiful', we are speaking metaphorically. So why the scepticism about moral disgust?

One possibility is that we tacitly assume that we *are* speaking metaphorically when we ascribe aesthetic properties to theories or actions, and so scepticism is moot.[18]

moral judgment—for instance, if it goes away upon the person's becoming persuaded that sibling incest is permissible—then the disgust is moral. Thanks to the referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

[17] Gaut [2007] explores this issue in detail. His main thesis is that the moral properties of artworks can enhance or detract from their value, but he also discusses aesthetic reactions to moral properties in non-art contexts, such as aesthetic judgments about a person's character.

[18] Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

I would resist this suggestion. When we call a theory 'elegant' or a person's character 'beautiful', we mean to capture a response that is partly aesthetic. (If it is not aesthetic, then what kind of response is it?) Indeed, theoretical physicist Sabine Hossenfelder [2018] devoted a book to what she sees as the inappropriate use of *aesthetic* criteria in physics, arguing that there is no reason to expect nature to conform to human aesthetic sensibilities. This case is unlike, for instance, 'thirst' in 'thirst for knowledge'. The latter does not refer to a physiological state, so the expression is metaphorical.

Now, perhaps one can argue that, when we call a theory 'elegant', we mean to express an aesthetic reaction but not the one that we have to visual elegance, and that the word 'elegant' must, for this reason, be said to function metaphorically. Maybe there is some other aesthetic property (perhaps one for which we have no words) that we mean to ascribe to the theory that we call 'elegant', and another aesthetic reaction that corresponds to appreciating that other property. But I find this suggestion insufficiently motivated. First, consider the fact that multiple physicists interviewed by Hossenfelder for the book suggest that the beauty and elegance of theories resemble closely those of familiar aesthetic objects. For instance, Hossenfelder quotes fellow physicist Gian Francesco Giudice saying 'When you stumble on a beautiful theory you have the same emotional reaction that you feel in front of a piece of art' [ibid.: 4]. Second, it is just not clear what the admittedly aesthetic properties ascribed to theories *can* be if not beauty and elegance. I conclude that we do not speak metaphorically when we talk about the beauty of theories, actions, or people's characters. Neither is there a reason to think that we *assume* that we are, and that this is why there are no sceptics about moral or theoretical beauty. But if such an assumption is not what explains the lack of scepticism here and its relative popularity in the moral disgust case, then what does?

The answer, I suggest, has to do with the binary choice paradigm with which we began—the assumption that a state is either qualitatively *the same* as that of physical disgust or else it is not a variety of disgust at all. We make no parallel assumption in the case of beauty and ugliness—that is, that there is only one kind of it (sensory beauty, say), and that all uses of the word that don't refer to that kind must be metaphorical at best. We must reject the binary choice for moral disgust as well: there is more than one kind of disgust.

The point about moral disgust's being an aesthetic reaction should be qualified. Since moral disgust—as we saw earlier, when discussing incest—involves a moral judgment, moral disgust is best seen as an *aestheticized moral reaction*. It is a form of emotional moral appraisal, similar to such moral emotions as pleasure associated with contemplating the morally beautiful.[19] Here, we find an intertwining of the moral and the aesthetic that is stronger than what we find in the case of purely aesthetic reactions. When it comes to the latter, there is an open question about the way in which the moral and the beautiful bear on each other. In aesthetics, *moralists* argue that a work's defending an immoral point of view is an aesthetic flaw in the work; *immoralists*, that it might well be an aesthetic merit; and *autonomists*, that the domains of morality and beauty are sealed-off from, and independent of, each other.[20] The important point for my purposes

[19] It is worth noting here that, while people react with laughter to some physically disgusting stimuli (see Hemenover and Schimmack [2007]), it is unlikely that anyone experiencing moral disgust would react with laughter.
[20] *Moralism* is the view that the aesthetic value of artworks is intimately intertwined with its moral value, such that moral flaws in an artwork are simultaneously aesthetic flaws, and perhaps also that moral merits are aesthetic merits (see Gaut [2007]). *Immoralism* is the view that moral and aesthetic value can be negatively correlated,

is that all three positions are perfectly intelligible. While you may think that revelling in torture, as de Sade appears to do in *Justine*, constitutes an aesthetic flaw in a book, you can see how an immoralist opponent may argue, without incoherence, that it constitutes a virtue, making the novel more interesting than it would otherwise be. Not so with moral disgust. The moral and the aesthetic judgment must go hand in hand here: you cannot coherently judge an action morally disgusting yet perfectly fine, morally speaking, let alone admirable. Moral disgust is therefore not a purely aesthetic reaction. If moral disgust is an aestheticized moral reaction and a form of emotional moral appraisal, moral disgust can be presumed to have defeasible moral authority on a par with the pleasure that we gain when we contemplate the morally beautiful.[21] This is my response to the Giubilini challenge mentioned earlier, to the effect that, even if moral disgust existed, it would not be very interesting unless it can be shown to have moral authority.

There is an important objection that I wish to consider here, and it has to do with another challenge to proponents of moral disgust that I mentioned in the beginning, courtesy of Guibilini. One might reply to my argument by saying that moral disgust is of no help in moral reasoning: assuming that moral-disgustingness properties exist, we either know that they exist independently of our feeling disgusted, or we do not. In the former case, moral disgust is otiose since it doesn't add much to our moral appraisal. In the latter case, the claim that moral disgustingness exists is question-begging, since we have no independent way of ascertaining that any purported moral disgust reaction tracks moral properties.[22]

In response, I suggest that neither of these two options is correct. On the one hand, if none of us *ever* experienced moral disgust, then we wouldn't know that there could be such a thing as moral disgustingness (in much the way that we wouldn't know that there could be beauty if none of us ever felt any aesthetic pleasure). However, it is not the case that a person can only know that something is morally disgusting when she herself feels moral disgust at that thing. In any particular case, the feeling is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral knowledge. For instance, if my child whom I love does something that I would find morally disgusting were the action performed by someone else, I might know that what my child has done is morally disgusting because it resembles actions that have morally disgusted me in the past in relevant ways. Yet I might not be disgusted by my child's action, because my love is too strong. In addition, it is at least in principle possible to learn by testimony that something is morally disgusting. (Admittedly, the role of testimonial evidence in both the moral and the aesthetic domain is controversial.) So, feeling moral disgust is not necessary.

The feeling of moral disgust is not sufficient, either. For instance, a Chinese person may experience moral disgust when confronted with a case where a Westerner puts his parents in a nursing home instead of taking care of them. But, upon reflection, she may

such that a moral flaw can be an aesthetic merit. An immoralist account has been advanced by Jacobson [1997] and Kieran [2006]. *Autonomism* is the view that moral and aesthetic values are independent of each other (see Anderson and Dean [1998]).

[21] Knapp [2003] argues, *pace* neo-sentimentalists, that disgust responses are not sensitive to normative properties. Knapp gives as an example having a child with leprosy. You may have a very good moral reason not to be disgusted, but that seems irrelevant to your disgust. I think that Knapp is mostly right about non-moral disgust (although physical disgust itself might be due to propaganda, as when the Untouchable or Dalit in India are seen as physically repulsive). But, as I argue here, there is a species of disgust that's distinctly moral. A judgment to the effect that something is morally disgusting is a moral judgment, although it is also an aesthetic one.

[22] Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

conclude that her reaction is culturally conditioned and that, after all, putting one's parents in a nursing home is not genuinely morally disgusting. As her judgment changes, her emotional reaction will tend to change as well. This is different from core disgust: a person whose homophobia was once based on a disgust response might change her moral judgment but continue to have a disgust reaction. This gives us a reason to think that her disgust was physical and did not stem from a moral source. I conclude that it is not question-begging to postulate the existence of moral disgust; nor is moral disgust uninteresting: it can serve as a moral guide.

In practice, one must be vigilant. This is so for a number of reasons. First, it is easy to confuse non-moral with moral disgust and to end up making unsupported moral judgments, as when people judge homosexuality to be wrong because of a physical disgust reaction at the sight of men kissing. Again, ordinary self-deception might lead us to misperceive and mislabel our affective states as 'moral disgust'. Thus, William Davie has us imagine a case in which an older brother receives a letter from his younger brother, saying that the younger brother will be unable to attend a family reunion. The older brother reports being morally disgusted by the younger sibling's behaviour. The older brother's wife counters: 'Smedley, the truth is that you like being disgusted, especially where your brother is concerned. You have to vent your spleen, as Grandma used to say. But why be so moralistic about it? Is the disgust you feel moral disgust?' [Davie 1979: 37].

But note that parallel considerations apply to other moral emotions. We might confuse a thirst for revenge with righteous indignation, bigotry with love of country, and so on. And yet, as Damasio [2005] and others have argued, it is unlikely that we could reason better without the emotions. Indeed, moral disgust is one of the few moral emotions that are inseparable from corresponding moral judgements. Other moral emotions, even good ones such as compassion, might run completely counter to our moral judgments. Thus, a teacher might feel compassion for a student and be motivated to make an exception for that student, despite judging that making an exception would be unfair to other students. Not so with moral disgust: if you are morally disgusted by something, you judge it to be wrong. Moral disgust is in this way similar to moral admiration and moral respect, and can be presumed to be a better moral guide than emotions that are separable from moral judgment, such as compassion or anger.[23] We might, however, be wrong about whether what we feel is genuinely moral disgust in much the way that we can be wrong about whether what we feel is righteous indignation.

I said earlier that the morally disgusting is judged to be wrong *in a particular way*. 'Particular' is important here. 'Disgusting' adds something qualitative and does not serve simply as an amplifier. The disgusting is not the same as the very wrong or the morally horrendous. Conversely, the very wrong need not be disgusting. A dictator responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people might be abominable without being morally disgusting in the way that the servile person is. A complete explication of the distinctive features of the morally disgusting is probably impossible, and I will not undertake to offer that here.

My proposal will become more intuitive if we consider some additional examples. The following are possible elicitors of moral disgust: a person who gambles away money left for his baby (the case with which I began); extreme obsequiousness; a murderer who sells the victim's clothes on eBay; swindling a trusting retiree out of her

[23] This gives rise to a question that I cannot address here, about the implications of this account for the sentimentalism/rationalism debate.

retirement savings via a telephone scam.[24] Or consider again the Robert Harris case: the younger brother's disgust at eating the dead victim's food was physical. But a person who reads about this, and who is disgusted with Robert's eating and offering his brother some of the food, is feeling moral disgust.

Each of these elicitors can put us in a state that involves a moral judgment and has moral properties as its intentional object. They share another feature that I broached briefly earlier—distinct phenomenology. Moral disgust possesses phenomenology *similar but not identical to* that of physical disgust.

To see the appeal of this suggestion, consider that there are other states whose phenomenology resembles that of physical disgust—sufficiently so for the term 'disgust' to apply—but that are not the same as physical disgust. Such is the case, for instance, with the disgust described by Sartre in *Nausea*. In one passage, the protagonist reports disgust with what we, today, might call 'motivational quotes': 'People. You must love people. Men are admirable. I want to vomit—and suddenly, there it is: the Nausea' [1964: 122]. In another passage, the narrator reports feeling disgusted with his own (lifeless and passionless) idea: 'My passion was dead. For years it had rolled over and submerged me; now I felt empty. But that wasn't the worst: before me, posed with a sort of indolence, was a voluminous, insipid idea. I did not see clearly what it was, but it sickened me so much I couldn't look at it' [ibid.: 5]. The disgust described here is not—or at least need not be—physical, although it is qualitatively similar to physical disgust. In all likelihood, similar considerations apply to religiously motivated disgust—for instance, seeing sin as defilement and the faithless as disgusting. Consider the Biblical Psalm 119: 'I look at the faithless with disgust, because they do not keep your commands' [Psalms 119: 158 (ESV)].

I wish to note, further, that some cases have mixed phenomenology as well as mixed (moral and non-moral) causes. We would feel disgust if forced to wear Hitler's washed sweater [Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff 1986]. The elicitor here is not solely moral, because merely looking at the jacket would not have that effect. Being forced to make physical contact—indeed, intimate contact, such as wearing, not simply touching—appears to have a perceived contamination effect. What about the phenomenology? This is not the same as that of moral disgust proper. Conceivably, wearing the jacket might trigger a gag reflex and vomiting.

Still other cases may involve metaphorical use. I suspect that it is precisely the metaphorical sense that's at stake when subjects report being disgusted with a low-ball offer in the ultimatum game. There is thus some truth to the sceptical position: we do *sometimes* speak metaphorically when we say that we are morally disgusted; but not *always*.

5. Conclusion

If my argument here succeeds, the sceptical argument fails. Moral disgust exists, and it is not simply physical disgust with a moral trigger.[25] However, the expression 'moral disgust' is, indeed, used to refer to a wide variety of phenomena, as Giubilini argues,

[24] Obsequiousness is one of Ian Miller's picks for a morally disgusting vice as well. Miller [1997: 181] quotes Hume's description of 'abjectness of character' that is 'disgustful and contemptible'—a person who has no sense of his own worth and so 'crouches to his superiors'.

[25] It is also unlikely that the so-called 'co-opt' hypothesis (that the disgust system was, at some point in our evolutionary past, co-opted and put to socio-moral use: see Kelly [2011]) is true. Certain examples, particularly of taboo violations such as sibling incest, fit the co-opt hypothesis, but those are not genuine cases of moral disgust.

and we find loose talk not only in ordinary discourse but among scholars. All of the following are things that people refer to when they use the expression 'moral disgust':

1. Core disgust influencing moral judgments: these could be completely extraneous (bad smells that make us harsher judges) or not (the sight of two men kissing that leads to the judgment that homosexuality is wrong).
2. Core disgust whose cause is a moral judgment (Psychiatric Patient case; *Black Book* movie case).
3. Core disgust whose *primary* cause is a moral judgment but that involves a non-moral element: eating (for example, Robert Harris case); wearing Hitler's jacket; bathing in baby's blood.
4. Metaphorical use ('disgust' at a low-ball offer in the ultimatum game).
5. Genuinely moral disgust: the elicitor is purely moral, the state has an intentional object that is moral, the state involves a moral judgment, and the phenomenology is similar to but not the same as that of core disgust: for example, obsequiousness; person who gambles away money left for his baby; murderer who sells the victim's clothes on eBay.

Looking at this list, we must conclude that there is truth to the proposals made by several of my opponents. We sometimes use the expression 'moral disgust' to refer to physical disgust that in some way influences moral judgments; we also sometimes use the expression metaphorically; and our use is sufficiently inconsistent to give rise to the worries voiced by Giubilini. If my argument succeeds, most of the things to which people refer when they speak of 'moral disgust' don't fit the bill, and yet there is genuine moral disgust.[26]

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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[26] This paper grew out of a commentary that I gave on Mara Bollard's 'Is There Such a Thing as Genuinely Moral Disgust?' at the Rocky Mountains Ethics Conference in August 2018, and I would like to thank Mara for the initial impetus, as well as the audience at the talk. I thank also Mike Huemer, Jon Tresan, and two anonymous referees for this journal for very helpful written feedback on earlier drafts.

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