

The Allure of the Disgusting

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ABSTRACT: What is missing from the many contemporary social scientific accounts that aim to explain our moral and political judgments by reference to our capacity to experience disgust is any acknowledgment of our fascination with disgusting objects. For this reason, Magada-Ward argues that disgust must be understood as fundamentally an aesthetic conception. In order to demonstrate this, the author explores the disturbing and very funny sculptures of Rona Pondick. This exploration shows that disgust is seldom a reliable indicator of political or moral wrongdoing but instead reveals both the contingent nature of our brute reactions and our inescapable vulnerability as embodied creatures.

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In *The Republic*, Plato appeals to the story of Leontius in order to justify his identification of spirit as a component of psyche that is irreducible to the operations of either reason or the appetites. In Plato's telling, Leontius is angry with himself for taking aesthetic pleasure in the sight of corpses, going so far as to castigate his own eyes by declaring, "Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!" (440a).

I gesture to this story because it nicely illustrates an aspect of the disgusting that is missing from the many contemporary social scientific

accounts that aim to explain our moral and political judgments by reference to our capacity to experience disgust. As is well known, the chief motivation for such research is the commonplace tactic of appealing to disgust as a reliable indicator of wrongdoing. (Think, for example, of public protests against the legalization of gay marriage.) I wish to claim that what is missing in both the social scientific accounts and the mundane practices from which they draw is any acknowledgment of our fascination with disgusting objects. Such objects do not merely repel us; instead, they often induce what Peter de Bolla calls a “somatic spasm,”² a reaction that typically culminates in an intensified, broadened, and thus ultimately beneficial understanding of the human condition. As I argue, attending to the workings of disgust not only reveals how dependent we are upon the tutelage of others in our efforts to render our experience intelligible but also, and perhaps most importantly, illustrates how these efforts at sense-making are shaped by a deep ambivalence about our embodiment.

To my mind, the artist whose work epitomizes the allure of the disgusting is the sculptor Rona Pondick. This is especially the case with her early works like *No*, *Angel*, *Baby*, and *Scrap*. These pieces are primarily composed of used shoes, baby bottles, soiled pillows, and fake teeth and are simultaneously quite disturbing and very funny. I argue that they, being so, exemplify not only the complicated nature of disgust but also the fact that culture plays a prominent role in its occurrence and expression. This is why Arthur Danto characterizes disgust as “a mechanism of acculturation.”³ This is also why the disgusting has so often played a major role in comedy. Consider the comedian Ron White’s “Dr. Phil Story,” wherein one bit describes him waking up with a massive hangover: “There’s a wet jolly rancher in my arm pit. Sour apple. Had to cut it out with a pair of scissors. Almost can’t eat it after that.”⁴

To be sure, much of the research conducted under the colloquialism “disgustology” can also be faulted on methodological and conceptual grounds. At root, however, I believe these limitations are a consequence of researchers’ failure to recognize that disgust is fundamentally an aesthetic conception. As such, attention to its allure, as evinced in art like Pondick’s, can enrich and correct our comprehension of how disgust actually operates in our moral and political deliberations.

Before I can turn to an examination of Pondick’s sculptures, however, I need to set forth my criticisms of current work in disgustology in more detail. This research has recently garnered attention in the popular press

because it seems to promise a biological explanation for differences in political orientation and moral approbation. In my judgment, however, acknowledging that much of this work does establish a strong correlation between high sensitivity to disgust and allegiance to moral and political conservatism certainly does not entail accepting it as an *explanation* of this connection. That is, because correlation is neither the same thing as causation nor always a reliable indicator of it, this research should not be understood as reducing the political and moral to the biological. Consider, for example, a study conducted by David Pizarro, Yoel Inbar, and Benjamin Ruisch profiled in a Kathleen McAuliffe article in *The Atlantic*. Appealing both to the fact that much of what tastes disgusting or foul to us resides in our perception of its bitterness and to the fact that people vary greatly in their number of receptors for bitterness (which are concentrated in fungiform papillae on the tongue), Pizarro et al. gave test subjects paper strips containing chemical compounds that can taste bitter to some people. As McAuliffe summarizes their findings, “Sure enough, those who had self-identified as being conservative were more sensitive to both compounds; many described them as unpleasant or downright repugnant. Liberals, on the other hand, tended not to be bothered as much by the chemicals or didn’t notice them at all.” As these researchers also determined, “the degree to which subjects’ views tilted to the right was . . . in direct proportion to the density of papillae on their tongue.”⁵ What accounts for the widespread fascination with this correlation is, I believe, the fact that such density in papillae is genetically determined. Nonetheless, just as identifying the proportion of Baptists relative to a town’s population as the factor most highly correlated with whether that town will be hit by a hurricane tells us nothing useful about the causes of hurricanes, admitting the correlation between sensitivity to bitter substances and political orientation tells us abysmally little about the origins of any particular person’s political or moral beliefs. Indeed, if we follow Danto and regard disgust as “a mechanism for acculturation”—recall that human infants happily play with their own feces—then it is not surprising that disgust sensitivity will vary between families. As John Deigh elaborates:

A child . . . develops susceptibility to disgust through instruction about what things it must not come in contact with. . . . Children, in other words, have no innate sense of contamination . . . and they can make the sort of judgment disgust consists in only after they have acquired the relevant notion. Consequently, while . . . susceptibility

to the emotion may be an inherited trait, what would be inherited in that event are the mechanisms [such as density of papillae] by which the emotion manifests itself and not any sensitivity to features in the world that elicits it. Such sensitivity, rather, is the product of parental and social teaching.⁶

Likewise, note Danto's remark that "I was philosophically illuminated to learn that of the seventeen or so authenticated feral children, *none* evinced disgust."⁷ Recall, too, that it is within the context of the family that we first receive moral and political instruction.

The research just adumbrated is also subject to conceptual criticism. This is not simply because these researchers leave the terms "liberal" and "conservative" undefined and rely solely on respondents' self-identification. More specifically, the straightforward connection between disgust and taste (understood as brute sensation) drawn in these studies ignores the fact that, as social historians have taught us, the term "disgust" only makes an appearance in the eighteenth century when the meaning of "taste" has been expanded to include the notions of cultivation and refinement. (There is a failure, in other words, to note the Kantian distinction between judgments of sensibility and judgments of reflection.) As William Ian Miller points out, "In the West taste does not become central to our conception of disgust until taste becomes a metaphor for an aesthetic and social sense of discernment."⁸

Consider, too, how often in these studies is disgust equated to nausea. For example, Jessica Tracy et al. conducted a series of experiments designed to test the role of disgust in moral judgment by using ginger to inhibit nausea.⁹ The only area where the antiemetic properties of ginger affected deliberation in any statistically significant sense concerned what the authors called "purity-based moral violations." Aside from the assumption, mentioned above, that disgust can be reduced to nausea, the authors can also be faulted for failing to consider whether purity violations are, in any meaningful sense, matters of morality. Note two of the four items test subjects were given: "A chemist has used special purifier materials to completely sanitize a person's feces. A man decides to eat a spoonful of the feces. How wrong is this?" and "A man decides to drink water out of a toilet bowl that has never been used. How wrong is this?"¹⁰ In similar vein, I myself, as a woman who came of age in the late 1970s, find unwashed hair repugnant. Nevertheless, I have never considered dirty

hair to constitute a moral failing. As Miller insists, “Disgust surely has a feel to it; that feel, however, is not so much one of nausea as of the uneasiness, the panic, of varying intensity, that attends the awareness of being defiled.”¹¹ Most importantly, defining disgust as nausea fails to consider the allure of the disgusting. That is, it is my claim that disgust is fundamentally an aesthetic conception. To feel disgust, in other words, is one prominent way in which we make sense of our world, a means of navigating our experience that, while dependent upon “the schooling of my senses” provided by others,¹² nonetheless operates beneath, or, more accurately, prior to my ability to articulate reasons for why aspects of my experience “make sense” in this way.

It is for this reason that, as mentioned previously, I find the early sculptures of Rona Pondick to provide so much food for thought. (As I hope to make plain in the following, my choice of this metaphor is deliberate.) More specifically, I argue that these sculptures not only illustrate core components of disgust but also, and most significantly, enlarge and correct our conventional understanding of it. (To appeal again to Kant, these works, in other words, present aesthetical ideas whereby the “free play” of the imagination and the understanding is stimulated.)

Following Carolyn Korsmeyer, Miller, Deigh, and Rachel Herz, I regard the essence of the disgusting to reside in our conviction that those substances that we so classify possess the power to contaminate us.¹³ In Miller’s words, “[disgust is] a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion.”¹⁴

On my view, two immediate consequences ensue from conceiving disgust in this way. First, it emphasizes that our beliefs about what, in fact, actually does constitute a threat are often wrong. This can be seen, for example, in the widespread discomfort provoked by public acts of breastfeeding. It can also be seen in the many and various food prohibitions found in every culture, few of which (if any) can be straightforwardly explained as inductive generalizations about which foods can sicken or kill us.¹⁵ Regarding the eating of meat specifically, Miller floats an intriguing suggestion: “Our disgust [at the prospect of eating certain animals] may be a manifestation of some primordial guilt, not so much for killing the father as for eating him. The fear and disgust . . . may be of cannibalism. This would help account for a greater reluctance to eat carnivores, and especially carrion eaters, who may actually have feasted on Dad or some

other human carcass, whereas the herbivore proceeds more discreetly and indirectly by eating the grass that grows on graves."¹⁶

Second, realizing that the concept of contamination must be learned suggests that the raw material for such learning consists in the very young child's feelings of discomfort and her consequent frustration at being unable to remove the source of this discomfort. Consider, for example, our revulsion at finding a hair in our mouth or in our food. (To my mind, this is still the most disgusting mundane experience that I know, partly because it is sometimes difficult to remove the hair and partly because of our fear that we have failed to find all of it.) Note, too, that, while they cannot yet entertain adult worries about how, precisely, the hair came to be in the food, even four-month-old infants have been found to register profound unease with hair in their mouths. It is for these reasons, moreover, that I remain agnostic regarding the claim that the fear of contamination constitutive of disgust is, as Martha Nussbaum has urged,¹⁷ ultimately rooted in our fear of death. This is largely because, while very young children are intimately familiar with the experiences of abandonment and pain, I am skeptical that they have any grasp of the concept of death.

In light of these reflections, now consider Pondick's 1990 sculpture, *No* (fig. 1). What makes this piece simultaneously so intriguing



FIGURE 1. Rona Pondick, *No*, 1990. Canvas pillow, shoes, plastic, and baby bottles, 35 x 45 x 56 in (88.9 x 106.68 x 142.24 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of Rona Pondick.

and so disturbing is, I believe, how it traffics with our visceral fears of contamination. This is why the tension between the clean baby bottles and the soiled pillow resonates so strongly. And, given our assumptions about the purity of girlhood—recall the old rhyme about what little girls are made of—the toddler-sized Mary Janes also contribute to the power of this piece.

This tension, moreover, is exacerbated when we recall the almost obsessive attempts to sterilize the bottles and the water with which to mix the formula that was prevalent in the heyday of bottle-feeding. Further illustrating the point made above concerning the woeful ability of disgust to track the healthy with any reliability, note that pediatricians now recommend using tap water rather than sterilized water in bottle-feeding because doing so beefs up the infant's immune system. It also illustrates the fact that the threat of contact with anything soiled or defiled inspires an urge to cleanliness, an effort at purification that, as Miller points out, is "a much more intensive and problematic labor than mere flight, one that takes more time and one at which we fear we may not have quite succeeded."¹⁸

Our aspiration to purity, moreover, brings up another essential element of the disgusting: its role in fueling this aspiration in the first place, a role, moreover, that explains why Pondick's naming of the 1987–88 sculpture pictured below as *Angel* (fig. 2) is so witty. As Plato pointed out so long ago, embodied human life is not only characterized by frightening processes of generation and decay but the very means by which we create and sustain that life distracts us from our higher purpose:

Those who have no experience of reason or virtue, but are always occupied with feasts and the like, are brought down and then back up to the middle, as it seems, and wander in this way throughout their lives, never reaching beyond this to what is truly higher up, never looking up at it or being brought up to it, and so they aren't filled with that which really is and never taste any stable or pure pleasure. Instead, they always look down at the ground like cattle, and, with their heads bent over the dinner table, they feed, fatten, and fornicate. (586a–b)

Angel fascinates, therefore, because it mocks, kindly and humorously, our disdain for these necessary activities of feeding and fornicating.



FIGURE 2. Rona Pondick, *Angel*, 1987. Wax, plastic, nylon, and pillows, 29 1/2 x 20 x 20 in (74.93 x 50.8 x 50.8 cm). Collection of the Artist. Photo courtesy of Rona Pondick.

Indeed, it is precisely its entanglement with what Miller calls those “key life processes like eating (and its consequences) and fornicating (and its consequences)” that, in his view, accounts for the allure of the disgusting.¹⁹ Consider, for example, how the objects piled on top of the soiled pillows resemble both penises and bananas. (In the interests of decorum, I refrain from pursuing this resemblance, or the practices that depend upon it, any further.) Consider, too, how the massing of these objects highlights another related aspect of the disgusting. This is how

it generates an awareness of the impermanence of embodied agency. In Korsmeyer's words, "Disgust apprehends not just destruction [as fear does] but reduction—of the noblest life to decaying organic matter in which all traces of individuality are obliterated."²⁰

However imperfectly and incompletely, it is nonetheless the possibility of love, both parental and romantic, that redeems the value of human embodied life. While all instances of intimacy seem to require what Miller characterizes as the suspension or relaxation of prohibitions regarding bodily access, my discussion is exclusively focused upon how this operates in the activity of child rearing. While both my husband and I regard the birth of our children as two of the most beneficial experiences of our lives, I must confess that we were completely taken aback by just how messy, sticky, and smelly very young children can be. That their messiness, stickiness, and smelliness did not, however, keep us from caring for them and loving them fiercely demonstrates the truth of Miller's claim that "it is precisely the overcoming of normal disgust that makes mother [and father]-love the model of all selfless love."²¹ This also, I think, explains why Pondick's sculpture *Baby* (fig. 3)



FIGURE 3. Rona Pondick, *Baby*, 1989. Wax, baby bottles and shoes, 3 1/2 x 3 x 11 in (8.89 x 58.43 x 27.94 cm). Collection Williams College Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Rona Pondick.

amuses so many parents. Perhaps most importantly, such overcoming is not merely a necessity in parenting, a development, in other words, that we would cheerfully skip if we could. Instead, this overcoming of normal disgust is often personally beneficial. Speaking for myself, I was, prior to motherhood, possessed of a prissiness that bordered on the neurotic. (For example, when I was a girl, even the thought of drinking milk straight out of the carton would cause me to gag.) That this is no longer the case accounts in part for why I have so much more equanimity now than I did when I was younger.

Very young children also often bite. They do so primarily out of frustration. My daughter, for example, once bit a slide in a playground because she was angry with herself for being scared to climb up its ladder. And, given the ubiquity of frustration in the life of the very young child, biting and the emergence of teeth that enables it are freighted with significance for children. Consider the role of teeth in *Scrap* (fig. 4), to which I make my appeal.

Neither a reproduction nor my brief exposition can do justice to just how unsettling this work is.²² Nonetheless, note that each of the pink balls contains a set of teeth (see fig. 5). To my mind, the juxtaposition between the soft color and the toy-like shape of the balls and the teeth



FIGURE 4. Rona Pondick, *Scrap*, 1991. Beaver College Art Gallery, Philadelphia, Pa. Photo courtesy of Rona Pondick.



FIGURE 5. Detail of teeth in the installation *Scrap*. Photo courtesy of Rona Pondick.

parallels that between the sweetness of very young children and their (often unexpected) aggression. It is for this reason that I concur with Nussbaum's insight that "[children] need stable and loving care, and care of a sort that reassures them that even their fear and aggression do not cancel the parent's love."²³ It should also be mentioned that Pondick

herself, in one of her very few attempts to interpret the meaning of her sculptures, emphasizes the connection between teeth and aggression. As Phong Bui paraphrases, "Someone asked you how the motif of teeth emerges in your work, and you said in addition to teeth being sexual, every time you're angry at somebody you just want to bite them."²⁴ As Bui continues, "And one woman came up to you afterwards and told you that when she gave birth to her child, she wanted to eat the child, as if it was the same impulse. So instead she went out and bought a suckling pig the same size as her baby, and ate the whole thing." Pondick's reply? "Right. And they say artists are insane."²⁵

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, my reflections here have been prompted by contemporary social scientific attempts to connect disgust-reactions to moral and political orientation. In addition to what I consider to be fairly serious methodological and conceptual limitations, I have argued that this research neglects an essential aspect of the disgusting. This is its allure, an allure, moreover, that is epitomized in the early sculptures of Rona Pondick. This means, therefore, that any comprehensive understanding of how disgust operates in human life must begin by acknowledging that disgust is first and foremost an aesthetic conception. It is for this reason that Korsmeyer, borrowing an archaic term from chemistry, christens the aesthetic properties of disgust as "the sublate." As she elaborates, "the counterpart to the sublime glimpse of cosmic power is the sublate confrontation with the vulnerability of material nature. One is exalted, uplifting, and spiritual; the other intimate and physical, recognizing the lowest common denominator of organic beings."²⁶ Most importantly, this is why attending to the workings of disgust enables the achievement of what C. S. Peirce calls a contrite fallibilism with respect to our efforts to comprehend ourselves and our world.²⁷ Disgust, in other words, is seldom a reliable indicator of political or moral wrongdoing but instead reveals both the contingent nature of our brute reactions and our inescapable vulnerability as embodied creatures. It is thus for this reason that engaging with the disturbing and very funny works of Rona Pondick proves to be both appropriately enlightening and humbling.

NOTES

1. Martha C. Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. Peter De Bolla, *Art Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2.
3. Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 54.
4. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAWyWI1ISx8>.
5. Kathleen McAuliffe, "The Yuck Factor," *The Atlantic* (March 2019), 8.
6. John Deigh, "The Politics of Disgust and Shame," *The Journal of Ethics* 10 (2006): 389.
7. Danto, *Abuse of Beauty*, 54.
8. William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 11.
9. Jessica L. Tracy, Connor M. Steckler, and Gordon Heltzel, "The Physiological Basis of Psychological Disgust and Moral Judgments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition* 116, no. 1 (2019): 15–32.
10. Tracy et al., "The Physiological Basis of Psychological Disgust," 31.
11. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 2.
12. Bonnie Mann, *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70.
13. See Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Fear and Disgust: the Sublime and the Sublate," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 62, no. 246 (4) (2008): 367–79; Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*; Deigh, "The Politics of Disgust and Shame"; and Rachel Herz, *That's Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Revulsion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).
14. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 2.
15. See Herz, *That's Disgusting*, chap 1.
16. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 48.
17. See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).
18. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 26.
19. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 112.
20. Korsmeyer, "Fear and Disgust," 574.
21. Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 134.
22. What further contributes to the creepiness of this piece is obviously the legs. What undercuts this creepiness and adds to its humor, however, is the fact that these legs resemble those attached to cloth dolls (such as Raggedy Ann).
23. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear*, 35.
24. Phong Bui, "Rona Pondick with Phong Bui," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 1, 2013, 5.

25. Bui, "Rona Pondick" 5–6.
26. Korsmeyer, "Fear and Disgust," 379.
27. See, for example, C. S. Peirce, "The First Rule of Logic" [1898], *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2*, The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

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