

# The Ethics of Disgust

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## Abstract:

I argue that the recent debate about the role disgust deserves in ethical thought has been impoverished by an inadequate understanding of the emotion itself. After considering Kass and Nussbaum's respective positions in that debate, and the implausible views of the nature of disgust on which their arguments rest, I describe my own view, which makes sense of the wealth of recent, often puzzling, empirical work done on the emotion. This view sees disgust as being primarily responsible for protecting against toxins and infectious diseases, but as also having been recruited to play auxiliary roles in the cognition of social norms and group boundaries. I argue that this view provides new and more plausible foundations for skepticism about the idea that disgust deserves some kind of special epistemic credit or moral authority, that the emotion is a trustworthy guide to justifiable moral judgments, or that there is any deep wisdom in repugnance.

## 1. Introduction: The Normative Debate

Recently, a cluster of issues have come to the fore in normative and applied ethics centering on the question of what role the emotion of disgust should play in morality, broadly construed: whether or not disgust should influence our considered moral judgments; if so, how feelings of disgust should be accounted for in various ethical evaluations, deliberations and decisions; what sort of weight, import or credit should be assigned to such feelings; and how our legal system and other institutions should best deal with the emotion.

At one end of the spectrum of positions available in this the debate are what I'll call *Disgust Advocates*. As the name suggests, Advocates hold that the emotion of disgust is well suited to guide our assessment of a variety of activities and social practices. Leon Kass, perhaps the most prominent Advocate, appeals to disgust – what he calls “repugnance” – as a basis for his influential argument against human cloning and (to a lesser extent) stem cell research. Others Advocates have made similar appeals to disgust in, for instance, discussions about the identification and definition of obscenity, and employed similar lines of reasoning to argue against abortion, pornography, homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

Most of these arguments appeal, tacitly or otherwise, to a particular view of the nature of disgust itself. This view, which I'll call the Deep Wisdom Theory, construes disgust as a morally attuned emotion that provides valuable insight into the "naturalness" or, more importantly, "unnaturalness" of certain activities and social practices.

Advocates who hold the Deep Wisdom Theory see disgust as a supra-rational source of information, a sensitivity that outstrips reason's ability to articulate, and perhaps even discern, certain types of properties or ethically important boundaries. Kass expresses this view a paper entitled "The Wisdom of Repugnance," (1997) and extends it in his book (2002), maintaining that "in crucial cases...repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it" (Kass 1997, cf. Miller 1997).

He goes on:

"In this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, and in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational will, repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder."

(Kass 1997)

Hence, in virtue of the nature of disgust as depicted by the Deep Wisdom Theory, Advocates hold that the deliverances of the emotion have a kind of *moral authority*, which should be respected and given its proper weight in ethical, legal and institutional deliberation, and ultimately in moral assessment in general.

On the other end of the spectrum are what I'll call *Disgust Skeptics*. As this name suggests, Skeptics are dubious of the influence the emotion can have on judgment and deliberation. They accordingly argue that feelings of disgust should be discounted in more considered deliberations about morality, and that the influence of the emotion in legal decisions and other social institutions should be minimized. Most prominent of Disgust Skeptics is Martha Nussbaum (2004a), who has argued against the relevance of the emotion to a variety of issues, including not just those mentioned above, but also questions about culpability and the proper severity of justified punishment for transgressions driven by feelings of disgust. She holds, rather, that "I did it because I was

repulsed” type defenses should not be allowed to mitigate responsibility for a crime, or lessen the penalty or sentence that should be issued for it.

Like their opponents, Disgust Skeptics’ arguments appeal to a particular view of the nature of disgust itself, but one that is very different from that favored by Advocates. This view, which (following the literature) I’ll call the Terror Management Theory, construes disgust as an emotion that now primarily serves to repress thoughts about our eventual, unavoidable deaths. In keeping us from confronting the implications of the fact that we must some day die, disgust helps to guard against the obviously maladaptive anxiety, terror, and potential paralysis that might be induced by contemplating such grim realities. Doing this, however, puts us at odds with our own physical bodies. Those bodies, and the various fluids, wastes and functions associated with their operation and maintenance as organic systems, serve as constant, inescapable reminders of our animality, and thus our mortality. As such, according to Terror Management Theory, our bodies are primary and prominent objects of disgust. The emotion is thus a source of conflict: in protecting us from existential terror, disgust ends up casting our very bodies as unsavory, and thus pushes us to hide from what we are, from our own humanity. Disgust becomes involved with issues commonly associated with social life and morality, according to this view, when people mistakenly project these uncomfortable feelings and anxieties outward, onto groups of people, activities, or social practices that they have come to associate with those anxieties. In short, feelings of disgust are ultimately an expression of unease about death that often stem from a deep-seated but unreasonable repugnance of organic bodies, and because of the conflict they engender, are easily displaced elsewhere and projected onto others.

Based on these sorts of considerations, Nussbaum (2004b) argues for the separation of disgust and morality:

“Does disgust, then, contain a wisdom that steers law in the right direction?

Surely the moral progress of society can be measured by the degree to which it separates disgust from danger and indignation, basing laws and social rules on substantive harm, rather than on the symbolic relationship an object bears to our anxieties.”

In virtue of the nature of disgust as depicted by the Terror Management Theory, Skeptics hold that the deliverances of the emotion are at best *morally irrelevant* and should be regarded as suspect. It is therefore a mistake to assign them any kind of special moral authority. Rather, feelings of disgust should be discounted in, and perhaps even viewed as counterproductive to, our ethical and legal deliberations, and moral assessments in general.

In this debate, my sympathies lie with Disgust Skepticism, and I agree that the emotion deserves no privileged status in ethical thought, and should indeed be regarded with deep suspicion in the moral domain. However, I find the arguments offered in favor of the position unconvincing, because I find the view of disgust on which those arguments rest highly implausible. Indeed, I find both the Deep Wisdom Theory and the Terror Management Theory equally unpersuasive. In what follows, then, I will set out my own view of both the nature of disgust and the role it plays in the social and putatively moral domain. I'll then comment on how it sits with both the other theories, and spell out some of its implications for this debate, and the reasons I am skeptical of any variation of the idea that disgust is a trustworthy guide in ethical thought or deliberation.

## **2. An Alternative View of Disgust**

Beginning with the pioneering work of psychologist Paul Rozin (see Rozin et al. 2000 for review), empirical work on disgust has surged in the last 20 years, and researchers from different fields have gathered a wealth of data on the emotion. Elsewhere (Kelly in press, Kelly forthcoming), I have argued at length that these data are best accommodated by what I call the Entanglement thesis and the Co-opt Thesis. The first holds that disgust is a composite emotion whose two main components originally evolved to protect against poisons and parasites, respectively. The second holds that once formed, disgust was co-opted to also play a number of roles in regulating the increasingly complex system of human social interactions. In acquiring these new functions, however, disgust retained many of the features that allow it to effectively

protect against poisons and parasites, rendering an imperfect fit between the emotion and the social issues on which it has been brought to bear.

## 2.1 The Entanglement Thesis

The case for the Entanglement thesis begins by considering in detail the character of the disgust response itself. When an individual is disgusted by something, the elicited response is composed of a number of coordinated but distinguishable features, including affective, behavioral and cognitive elements. For instance, it is marked by the familiar feeling of nausea, a variety of aversion generated largely by the gastrointestinal system, and which gives rise to powerful oral and gut based feelings (which Rozin has called a “sense of oral incorporation”). The characteristic (and universal) facial expression of disgust is the gape, which, in especially intense episodes, can become the full act of retching from which it derives. Another behavioral component of the response is a quick, reflex-like withdrawal motion, a bodily recoil from the offending entity.

There is a more cognitive inferential signature associated with the response as well. That signature includes more sustained senses of offensiveness and contamination. Once marked as disgusting an entity is thought of as soiled, tainted, or dirty. It is considered repugnant, as is both physical and symbolic contact with it; indeed mere proximity to it is hardly tolerable. Disgusting entities tend to command attention, but even thinking about them is unpleasant. In addition to this form of offensiveness, disgusting items have the ability to transmit their disgustingness to other entities, usually by way of perceived physical or symbolic contact. Once thus contaminated, those entities are also considered disgusting, and elicit the full disgust response. As a result of these features of the response, disgust is often accompanied by a motivation to cleanse or purify oneself (Hejmadi et al. 2004).

There are a few more noteworthy elements of the emotion. First, the response is on a hair trigger; the system is easily set into motion. Second, activation happens quickly and automatically; one does not have to deliberate or engage in any explicit reasoning in order to become fully disgusted. Indeed, it can be involuntary as well: one cannot simply decide to not be disgusted by something, and the response can be triggered *despite* what

one knows explicitly (turds-shaped fudge is a well-known example). Third, while elements of the response are themselves distinguishable, they function as an integrated whole. Finally, the emotion is in a sense ballistic: once activated, it runs its course, generating the full, coordinated package of affective, behavioral, and cognitive components, and influencing downstream cognitive activity in typical ways, regardless of the actual character of the eliciting entity. In light of these features of the response, once something triggers disgust, the underlying cognitive system causes an agent to think about and treat the offending entity *as-if* it were nauseating, dirty, impure and contaminating, whether or not it really is, or whether or not those assessments or inferences are endorsed by the person, or whether or not they are in any way reflectively justifiable.

The Entanglement thesis explains these facts by claiming that at the core of the system that we now recognize as disgust is a pair of cognitive mechanisms with distinct evolutionary histories and trajectories, but which have become functionally entangled with each. One of those, which I will call the poison mechanism for short, initially evolved to monitor food intake, and protect the gut against potentially toxic, poisonous or otherwise harmful substances and entities that might be ingested through the mouth and taken into the gastrointestinal system. This obviously important adaptive problem was particularly difficult for early humans, who were both omnivores and generalists. They also inhabited a large number of habitats, which presented different food opportunities and nutritional resources. Moreover, advances in hunting techniques lead to a much more meat intensive diet than their hominid predecessors.

Many components of the basic disgust response are easily traced to this mechanism, and its associated adaptive problem. The gape face, which now functions as an expression and signal, derived from, and involves many of the same muscle groups operative in, the act of retching, or expelling substances from the mouth. Nausea, the feeling of aversion associated with disgust, is produced in large by components of the gastrointestinal system, giving rise to the strong oral and gut-based feelings associated with the emotion. (Indeed, the neural seat of disgust, the insular cortex, has been linked to gastrointestinal functions, and has been called the “gustatory cortex”.)

Entangled with the poison mechanism at the core of disgust is what I will call the parasite mechanism. As its name suggests, this mechanism initially evolved to protect the entire body from parasites of all sorts, including microbes and disease carrying agents. It guards against these sorts of threats by causing the organism to avoid close physical proximity to infectious agents, and perhaps more importantly, anything that is likely to harbor them. Since most parasites are not directly perceivable, either because they take up internal residence in their hosts or are simply too small to be detected by the naked eye, this mechanism is also sensitive to a wide range of cues that reliably indicate their presence, including signs of contamination or infection in other organisms. The possible routes of disease transmission include, but far outstrip, ingestible substances, and, accordingly, the parasite mechanism, and thus disgust, must monitor and be sensitive to a far larger domain of cues.

Many components of the basic disgust response can be easily traced to this mechanism and its associated adaptive problem as well. The quick physical recoil is a first step in putting distance between oneself and something that might be potentially infectious, and the avoidance motivation and sense of offensiveness help maintain that distance. The motivation to cleanse and purify oneself after having come into close proximity with a disgusting entity is clearly fitted to the dangers surrounding parasites and diseases, and the sensitivity to contamination is a rational reaction to the vicissitudes of contagion and disease transmission. Since indicators of parasitic infection are many and diverse, disgust is sensitive to a wide range of cues, thus expanding the domain of the cognitive mechanism and laying the groundwork for a much more flexible system for acquiring new disgust elicitors. Finally, the fact that disgust is easily activated, and operates automatically, without the need for volition or deliberation, represents a “better safe than sorry” logic that is built into the cognitive system itself. While this feature reflects the potentially fatal nature of the adaptive problem, the Entanglement thesis provides the resources to see that many instances of disgust (juice stirred with a brand new comb or sterilized cockroach, a laundered sweater that once belonged to someone with tuberculosis) are in fact false positives.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is much to say about conditions and selective pressures that caused the poison and the parasite mechanism to entangle, and fuse into the functionally integrated system we now recognize as disgust, but

## 2.2 The Co-opt Thesis

Opposite the disgust response is a diverse array of things that trigger it. Some of these are clearly linked to the twin primary functions of protecting against poisons and parasites. For instance, some of the most likely candidates for being universal, innate elicitors of disgust are associated with infection and vectors of disease transmission: bodily fluids, organic waste and decay, insects and other types of creepy crawlies like slugs and rats, sexual contact, and reliable indicators of infection in conspecifics such as sores, discolorations, and other types of phenotypic abnormalities (though what counts as “abnormal” in this sense begins fairly open ended and can be calibrated by learning and social influence). Disgust is also closely associated with adulterated food like spoiled meat or moldy bread, though in many cases perfectly edible foods become disgusting, though the specifics of what foods are found disgusting (escargot, Fried Twinkies, sushi, bloody steaks) can vary at both an individual and cultural level.

On the other hand, certain types of elicitors of disgust look a bit more puzzling from the point of view of the Entanglement thesis. More specifically, disgust has been shown to play a large and important, though often nearly subliminal, role in human social interactions (Haidt et al. 1997, Rozin et al. 2000, Kelly forthcoming). Certain activities and the people who engage in them can become disgusting, as can entire groups of people, the values and norms that bind them together, and the symbols that indicate membership in the group itself. (For instance, in extreme cases, Democrats might find distinctively Republican policies, values, and iconography disgusting, and vice versa.) As with cuisine, there is often a great deal of variation from one group to the next about which activities, norms, and groups of people are in fact disgusting, but for any particular person, they are usually the activities, norms, and identifiable members of *other* groups. (Indeed, distinctive cuisines themselves are often markers of group membership.) These considerations, together with the pattern of within group similarities and between group

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space constraints prevent me from going into the issue here. For more discussion, see Kelly forthcoming, chapter 2.



differences, suggest that such instances of disgust are not all simple false positives, but something more systematic and significant.

The Co-opt thesis supplements the Entanglement thesis to explain these facts. It holds that once formed, the disgust response acquired a number of auxiliary functions, in addition to protecting against poisons and parasites. The cognitive system was co-opted, recruited to also play a number of roles in regulating social interactions. More specifically, it became systematically involved in the cognition of social norms and group boundary markers.

There is an increasingly convincing case to be made that social norms are a crucial ingredient in human's ability to cooperate on a large scale (Boyd and Richerson 2005, Richerson and Boyd 2005, Henrich and Henrich 2007). Moreover, many theorists have argued that humans are equipped with dedicated cognitive machinery associated with social norms (Nichols and Mallon 2005, Sripada and Stich 2007, Mallon and Nichols forthcoming), and that emotions play an important role in generating the typical motivations and behaviors associated with those norms (Nichols 2004, Prinz 2008, cf. Haidt 2001). Indeed, research has shown that disgust is the relevant emotion in certain types of norms, including table etiquette rules, (Nichols 2002), meat taboos (Fessler and Navarrete 2003), and incest taboos (Lieberman et al. 2003, Fessler and Navarrete 2004). Cultural psychologists have also identified an important class of norms that are linked to and follow the logic of disgust (Shweder et al. 1997, Rozin et al. 1999). These so-called purity norms are distinct from, for instance, harm norms or fairness norms, in that transgressions of them do not usually result in direct harm or the inequitable treatment of any person. Instead, they articulate other aspects of a culture's way of life by prescribing acceptable foods and the proper way to prepare them, regulating sexual activity, codifying appropriate clothing in specific settings (especially perhaps ceremonial contexts), and stipulating suitable ways to deal with corpses, blood, bodily waste and other organic materials. Details of purity norms and the proper forms of life they delineate differ from cultural to culture, of course. Whatever the specifics, though, they are generally thought of as guidelines for protecting the purity of the body and often the soul, and the issues they regulate are often cast in terms of sanctity and defilement; transgressors are considered morally tainted, spiritually polluted, or unnatural. Purity

norms are central to the moral codes of many traditional or religious cultures, where a transgressor is taken to be disrespecting the sacredness of the deity, offending God or the gods, or violating the divine order. While they do not enjoy the same prominence of place, they are not completely absent from more secular cultures. There, transgressions are often cast as crimes against nature or violations of the natural order.

Alongside work on social norms, there is long tradition in the social sciences emphasizing the importance of symbolically marked groups (Barth 1969). Evolutionary anthropologists Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson elegantly connect norms to social groups and their boundaries, and the role the disgust is apt to play in thinking about them:

“[G]roups of people who share distinctive moral norms, particularly norms that govern social interactions, quite likely become ethnically marked. This suggests that ethnocentric judgments easily arise because “we the people” behave properly, while those “others” behave improperly, doing disgusting, immoral things, and showing no remorse for it, either.”

(Boyd and Richerson 2005, page 101)

Indeed, recent work has suggested that humans are inherently sensitive to the relevant markings (McElreath et al. 2003, Henrich and McElreath 2003; see also Gil-White 2001). Some of that work investigates the types of biases that underlie ingroup favoritism and ethnocentrism, while some looks at negative biases against outgroups. Perhaps unsurprisingly, disgust has been linked to the most extreme cases of prejudice and xenophobia towards other groups. Indeed, researchers have found that different emotions are associated with the subtly different forms of prejudice that one group directs at another (Cottrell and Neuberg 2005), and confirmed that disgust is the emotion most often operative in driving those attitudes about the most vilified and dehumanized of outgroups (Harris and Fiske 2006, 2007).

The Co-opt thesis explains these facts by claiming that as human social life become more complex, the disgust response was recruited to play roles in the cognition and motivation associated with social norms and group boundaries. Indeed, the fusion of the parasite and poison mechanisms created a cognitive system ripe to be co-opted to other purposes: it reliably produced a particular piece of motivation (aversion) and behavior (avoidance), and it was equipped with a fairly flexible acquisition system,

primed to be sensitive to a wide range of triggers, including social cues and phenotypic abnormalities in others. Together with the Entanglement thesis that it supplements, the Co-opt thesis also holds that, once recruited, the emotion did not *lose* the primary functions, features and sensitivities that allow it to effectively protect against poisons and parasites. Hence, when disgust is the emotion recruited to provide motivation and avoidance, be it in conjunction with a certain norm, to a particular social practice, or to the symbols that mark off an entire group of people, agents not only experience aversion and avoidance motivation, but tend to naturally, though often unjustifiably, think of and treat the elicitor as-if it were also tainted, polluted, contaminating, even inhuman.

### **3. New Foundations for Disgust Skepticism**

Let us now return to the normative debate over the role disgust *should* play in morality, broadly construed. Recall that Advocates hold disgust should be accorded a certain moral authority. The argument for this turned on the Deep Wisdom Theory of disgust itself, which depicts the emotion as a supra-rational sensitivity, and holds that feelings of disgust mark boundaries of naturalness or unnaturalness, even if reason was unable to clearly articulate them or supply clear justification for honoring them. Skeptics, on the other hand, hold disgust has no moral authority, and are deeply suspicious of the influence it can exert on ethical thought and deliberation. The argument for this turned on the Terror Management Theory, which depicts disgust as primarily serving to repress thoughts about mortality and death. It sees the emotion as being especially sensitive to anxiety producing reminders of our fragile animal nature, but holds that this paradoxically produces deep discomfort with key aspects of our own humanity. We resolve this conflict by projecting our own anxiety and discomfort outward, onto practices we dislike, or even entire groups of people that engage in them.

Against both the Deep Wisdom Theory and the Terror Management Theory, I have advanced my own view of disgust encapsulated by the Entanglement thesis and the Co-opt Thesis. This view is more evolutionarily grounded, considerably more detailed, and better explains the fine-grained structure revealed by a wealth of empirical work on the emotion. In doing so, it shows how both competing theories are simply wrong about

the nature of the emotion itself. At its core, disgust is not repressing reminders of death or projecting uniquely human existential anxiety onto others, nor is it providing any deep wisdom about the “unnaturalness” of certain activities or social practices. Rather, it is primarily an element of our defenses against a pair of challenges faced by nearly all creatures in the natural world, namely toxins and diseases.

In itself, this view undermines one strong type of claim a Disgust Advocate might make, i.e. that eliciting disgust is *sufficient* to show something is immoral, or that feelings of disgust suffice to justify an ethical evaluation. Rather, a large part of what disgust properly responds to has nothing to do with morality, but with cues likely to mark poisons and parasites.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this view allows us to see how the primary functions of monitoring food intake and protecting against infection are reflected in the elements and operational features of the response itself. Many of these, I submit, should further undermine our confidence in disgust as a moral authority or source of reliable information about ethical considerations. For instance, due to the nature of its proprietary issues, we saw that disgust follows a “better safe than sorry” rule. Rather than being supra-rational or ungraspable by reason, this simply makes good adaptive sense. It also, however, results in the emotion being extremely susceptible to false positives, and agents easily becoming disgusted by entities that are in fact neither poisonous nor infectious. The cognitive system is just a blunt instrument; the mere fact that something is disgusting is a far from failsafe indicator that something is poisonous or infectious, let alone immoral.

My view, unlike either of its competitors, can also shed light on the significance and mechanics of the wide-ranging variation we see in what different individuals and cultures consider disgusting. On the one hand, according to the Entanglement thesis, the large proper domain of the parasite mechanism allowed for a very flexible acquisition system, and variation in the environments (physical, social, developmental, etc.) of individuals can thus calibrate individual disgust systems in different ways. On the other hand, the Co-opt thesis showed how disgust became systematically linked to the norms

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<sup>2</sup> Another way to put this point is that my view of disgust illustrates how the extensions of *disgusting* and *morally wrong* simply cross cut each other, and so shows that disgust is neither necessary nor sufficient to justify moral judgment. For a somewhat similar line of thought put to different uses, see Nichols’ (2004, chapter 1) discussion the distinction between *bad* and *wrong*, and its relevance for understanding other aspects the cognitive architecture underlying morality.

that govern social life, and sensitivity to group membership and boundaries. Together, these provide the elements to explain how disgust can latch onto whatever the prevailing norms and boundaries are in a particular social group or culture. Hence, different individuals can come to be disgusted not just by different foods, but also by different types of groups and social practices, depending on parochial social divisions, as well as whatever practices and activities are proscribed by the norms prevailing in the local environment and culture.

This begins to explain, but it certainly does not justify. Rather, the disgust involving norms themselves, the behaviors and practices they regulate, or judgments about those that engage in them, may or may not be morally justified. I have no positive account on offer, no list of factors that legitimately provide moral justification. Mine is a skeptical argument, and so has a negative conclusion: feelings of disgust should certainly not be on that list. The involvement of disgust does not cut one way or the other. If the issue is one of morality and moral justification, then the mere fact that some social practice or violations of a certain norm induces disgust in some people is no more to the point than the fact that some people find sushi disgusting, while others delight in it. This insight into the nature and sources of variation is of particular importance in confronting some of the strongest and most explicit claims made by Disgust Advocate Leon Kass. For, we can understand much of the variation we find in what people find disgusting without having to resort to denigrating large swaths of people as “shallow” because they have “forgotten how to shudder”. Who is shallow and who is deep, who is right and who is wrong, will have to be determined on other grounds.

Finally, my view provides resources to undercut another form of Disgust Advocacy. For, another type of Advocate might become convinced that feelings of disgust are not relevant to issues of moral justification, but continue to hold that we should be disgusted by certain activities, practices, or groups that are genuinely immoral. For example, one might hold not just that racists are wrong and immoral, but that they should disgust us, i.e. that disgust is the justified, moral response to racism. I am dubious of this conclusion, too, and the use of the emotion that it recommends. For, my view also suggests that even when disgust involving moral judgments or social norms *are* justified – on other, more defensible grounds – we continue to have reason to be suspicious of

disgust's influence on them and the behavior they drive. Since those features of the emotion that are fitting responses to poisons and parasites are brought to bear on whatever else disgust becomes involved with, we will tend to intuitively, if often implicitly, think of any elicitors of disgust as being tainted, polluted, contaminating, or inhuman as well. I have no doubt that, for example, the judgment that racism is morally wrong is justified. In recommending disgust as the response to racists, however, we would be inviting the easy slip into thinking of and treating them not just as wrong, but as dirty, tainted, contaminating, even inhuman. As intuitively correct as disgust could make these further assessments seem, it goes without saying at this point that I do not think they would be justified, or even productive.

#### **4.0 Conclusion: Thoughts on Selective Debunking**

Far from being a reliable source of special, supra-rational information about morality, as the Disgust Advocates would have it, I have provided a variety of novel reasons to be very skeptical of any variation of the idea that disgust deserves some kind of special epistemic credit, that the emotion is a trustworthy guide to justifiable moral judgments, or that there is any deep ethical wisdom in repugnance. As vivid and compelling as feelings of disgust can be from the inside, the deliverances of the emotion in the moral domain are explainable in such a way that we can see they need not be honored as wise. I have also emphasized that while I share a conclusion with other Disgust Skeptics, my argument is based on a different, more empirically grounded, and, I submit, more plausible, view of the nature of disgust and the role it plays in the social and putatively moral domain. I'd like to end with a comment on what the line of thought sketched out above shares with that of other Disgust Skeptics, namely argumentative strategy.

Recent discussions have explored the possibility, prospects, and potential limitations of debunking explanations of morality (Singer 1981, 2005; Greene 2007; cf. Stich in press). While I am skeptical about global debunking, I have just advanced a

*selective* debunking argument against the relevance of disgust to moral justification.<sup>3</sup>

The general form of the argument can be straightforwardly cast as a conditional: If some particular cognitive mechanism can be shown to be problematic in the right way, and the moral attitudes, intuitions or judgments influenced by that cognitive mechanism can be cleanly identified, then we should disregard, discount or discredit those intuitions and be suspicious of the moral judgments that they influence, to the extent that we can.

Though it is sketchy and schematic, I find this general line of thought compelling. I also find this way of framing the argument useful in that it makes explicit that “problematic” is probably both the most crucial and slippery of the notions in play. I do think that the types of considerations I have raised about disgust suffice to show it is problematic “in the right way”. I do not know how to unpack that and remove the scare quotes, however. Whether there is a general recipe for the relevant notion of “problematic” that might be specified, and what it would look like, or whether each selective instance will need to be judged on a case-by-case basis, are all issues that I think merit further thought.

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<sup>3</sup> The terminology “selective debunking” is taken from a series of thought provoking posts on the topic by Tamler Sommers at The Splintered Mind blog (<http://schwitzsplinters.blogspot.com/2009/05/on-debunking-part-deux-selective.html>).

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