

On Disgust Skepticism

Abstract: Recent research demonstrates that disgust influences moral judgment. This discovery raises moral questions: should we rely on feelings of disgust as a guide to morality, or should we discount feelings of disgust as a source of bias and irrationality? Philosopher Daniel Kelly calls these two options “disgust advocacy” and “disgust skepticism.” He argues for disgust skepticism, but rejects the theory of disgust endorsed by prominent disgust skeptic Martha Nussbaum. I compare Kelly’s and Nussbaum’s cases for disgust skepticism. Although disgust skepticism does follow from Nussbaum’s theory of the nature of disgust, I agree with Kelly that her theory is implausible. However, Kelly’s own theory of the nature of disgust does not justify skepticism about the norms disgust is psychologically recruited to enforce. Rather than taking the failure of disgust skepticism as evidence in favor of disgust advocacy, I conclude that disgust advocacy and disgust skepticism represent a false choice.

Keywords: disgust, moral psychology, ethics

Moral judgments are often expressed in the idiom of disgust. Incest? Disgusting. Bestiality? Gross. It turns out this is not just a manner of speaking, as psychologists have shown that the emotion of disgust often plays a causal role in the production of moral judgment. Some philosophers, including most prominently Martha Nussbaum, have urged that the psychological role of disgust in moral judgment is morally problematic, and to be avoided (2001, 2004, 2010). More recently, philosopher Daniel Kelly has disputed Nussbaum’s theory of the nature of disgust, but followed her example in arguing for “disgust skepticism” – the view that “at best disgust should be discounted in reflection and moral deliberation, and at worst is a powerful instrument of oppression that should be regarded with outright suspicion” (Kelly 2011, 10-11).¹ Kelly deploys disgust skepticism against “disgust advocates” such as Leon Kass (1997), who “hold that disgust alerts us to the morally important boundary between the natural and the unnatural, and should thus be considered a trusted source of moral guidance” (ibid.

10). Despite Nussbaum and Kelly's disagreements about the underlying nature of disgust, they agree that the role of disgust in generating moral judgment is inherently suspect, and to be minimized to the extent possible.

While I concede to Nussbaum and Kelly that disgust is associated with many questionable and indeed dangerous moral judgments, I will argue that disgust skepticism is an overreaction. Disgust has an important place within moral psychology, and should not be rejected along with the morally questionable norms it can be psychologically recruited to implement. In short, Kelly's distinction between disgust skepticism and disgust advocacy represents a false choice. Disgust is a crucial part of the human capacity to embody norms. Consequently, the focus should be on evaluating the norms disgust is recruited to embody, rather than seeing disgust itself as the problem. To make this case, I will examine the bases for Kelly's and Nussbaum's versions of disgust skepticism. Although disgust skepticism does follow from Nussbaum's theory of the nature of disgust, I agree with Kelly that her theory is implausible. However, Kelly's own theory of the nature of disgust does not justify singling out disgust-backed moral judgments for skepticism. Or, to be more precise, if Kelly has a case for skepticism at all, it is a case for moral skepticism more generally, not a case for disgust skepticism in particular.

First, consider Nussbaum's theory of disgust. Her account turns on a distinction between "primary" and "projective" disgust. The "primary" objects of disgust include "feces, blood, semen, urine, nasal discharges, corpses, decaying meat, and animals/insects that are oozy, slimy, or smelly" (2010, 15). Following Rozin (2000), Nussbaum maintains that primary disgust objects are all unpleasant reminders of one's own animality and mortality. Because these reminders are so unwelcome, there is a psychological incentive to suppress acknowledgment of one's own animality and mortality by projecting fears of contamination onto other people, typically members of oppressed minorities.ⁱⁱ Nussbaum writes:

A ubiquitous reaction to this sense of one's own disgustingness is to project the disgust reaction outward, so that it is not really oneself, but some other group of people, who are seen as vile and viscous, sources of a contamination that we might possibly keep at bay. (2001, p.205)

When disgust reactions are directed at other individuals or groups in this way, Nussbaum calls it "projective" disgust. Projective disgust involves "the projection of disgust properties onto a group or individual...linking the allegedly disgusting group or person somehow with the primary objects of disgust" (ibid. 16). To be disgusted by another human being or their behavior is "to view another human being as a slimy slug or a piece of revolting trash...imput[ing] to the other a subhuman nature" (2010, xvii).

Nussbaum's theory of disgust fits into her larger cognitive theory of emotion, according to which emotions are not mere passive feelings or affect programs lacking cognitive content, but rather cognitions or judgments about what matters to one's own flourishing or eudaimonia (2001, chapter 1). In Nussbaum's view, to be disgusted by another person is to make false, divisive and dehumanizing judgments about them. For disgust involves the judgment that its object is contaminating, impure, and inhuman. Nussbaum believes all such judgments about members of "out" groups to be false and ultimately irrational, reflecting a failure to accept one's own humanity, which inevitably includes animality and mortality, by projecting falsified caricatures of those features onto others. Because no person or group is objectively similar to primary objects of disgust such as feces, corpses, or ooze, Nussbaum concludes that moral judgments rooted in disgust are inherently false and unjustified. This is not to deny that disgust is often involved in moral judgments, but rather to warn that disgust is inimical to any justifiably inclusive morality:

Disgust poses a threat not to morality itself, then – one can have a type of moral system while treating certain people as vehicles of disgust; but it does pose a threat to the idea of *equal*

worth and dignity of persons that is a very important part of any morality that most of us would favor. (Nussbaum 2001, 221)

In sum, disgust-backed moral judgments are necessarily false and dehumanizing, which is why we should reject any moral judgment psychologically backed by disgust.

If true, Nussbaum's theory supports disgust skepticism, but not a more global skepticism about moral judgment generally. For her brief against disgust does not stem from any general hostility to emotion or its role in moral psychology, but rather from the cognitive content of disgust in particular. Disgust represents its object as contaminating and inhuman, but no human being is in fact inhuman. In place of disgust, Nussbaum promotes the cultivation of moral indignation and appropriate anger as responses to norm violations. The cognitive content of these emotions concerns wrongful harm, not impurity or contamination (2004, 99). Nussbaum concludes that indignation and anger are compatible with respecting the humanity of the one we are angry with, and indeed invite an effort to make reparations. Disgust, in contrast, does not similarly allow for the possibility of rehabilitation: disgusting things contaminate, and must be excluded or even eliminated. Disgust is thus an impediment to another morally important emotion, compassion:

[We] may now notice a bifurcation in the emotions. Some expand the boundaries of the self, picturing the self as constituted in part by strong attachments to independent things and persons. Love and grief are paradigmatic of such emotions; and, as we shall see, compassion pushes the boundaries of the self further outward than many types of love. Some emotions, on the other hand, draw sharp boundaries around the self, insulating it from contamination by external objects. Disgust is paradigmatic of such an emotion." (2001, 300)

As Nussbaum sees it, compassion requires us to see shared humanity, whereas disgust sets up divisions between the human and the inhuman, the pure and the impure.

Kelly shares Nussbaum's disgust skepticism, but disagrees with her about the underlying nature of the emotion. Kelly argues that an adequate understanding of the evolutionary origins of disgust cancels any expectation that it provides reliable moral insight. In particular, Kelly explains that "core" disgust initially emerged as a mechanism for the avoidance of poisons and parasites, and continues to serve that function. Given how dangerous poisons and parasites can be, disgust tends to false positives, exhibiting a "better safe than sorry" logic (2011, 172). Hence, the cognitive system employing disgust is a "blunt instrument" even with respect to its original function. But disgust was also later co-opted in our evolutionary history to play social functions, including the cognition of social norms and the policing of group boundaries (ibid. 9, 135ff). Disgust remains a blunt instrument in its social functions, maintaining a propensity to false positives. Moral disgust also maintains core disgust's main cognitive and behavioral features, including judgments of contamination and behaviors of avoidance. Once disgust is shown to be evolution's blunt but adaptively effective way of protecting us from poisons and parasites, and binding us to our own cultural peers to the exclusion of "out" groups, Kelly concludes that disgust is not, as Kass would have it, "the emotional expression of deep wisdom" (Kass 1997). Rather, as Kelly argues, disgust contributes nothing to moral justification:

I should also stress that I do not have a positive general account of moral justification on offer, [nor any] list of factors that legitimately *do* provide moral justification. Mine is a skeptical position, and so has a negative upshot: feelings of disgust should certainly not be on that list. When the question is one of morality and moral justification, the mere fact that some social practice or violations of a certain norm induces disgust in some people is neither here nor there, no more to the point than the fact that some people find sushi disgusting, while others relish it. (2011, 176)

For Kelly, disgust skepticism is based on the point that disgust reactions have no reliable connection to morally justified conclusions: because every culture's norms are embodied through acquisition of disgust reactions, the fact that one is disgusted shows at most that one's norm has been violated, not that the norm is justified. Disgust advocates are therefore wrong to claim that disgust reliably tracks moral justification.

Now compare Nussbaum's version of disgust skepticism to Kelly's. Nussbaum argues that moral judgments backed by disgust warrant skepticism because disgust is inherently dehumanizing. Kelly, in contrast, argues that disgust is not reliably correlated with moral justification because cultural norms, justified or otherwise, are backed by disgust reactions, and because disgust is a "blunt instrument" prone to false positives. Notice that Kelly's form of argument applies with equal vigor to Nussbaum's defense of moral indignation or anger: norms backed by anger may or may not be morally justified, so the feeling of anger is not evidence of deep moral wisdom. Indeed, as Kelly says of disgust (2011, 176), the fact that one feels angry "is neither here nor there" with respect to moral justification. At best, anger might be less prone to false positives than disgust, and hence a marginally less unreliable guide to moral justification. Nussbaum's argument, in contrast, isn't based on reliability, but on the content of the judgments involved in disgust and anger. Nussbaum's objection to disgust is ultimately more moral than psychological: in her view, anger is, but disgust is not, compatible with acknowledging the equal worth of all persons.

We've seen that Nussbaum's theory of disgust, if true, succeeds in defending disgust skepticism. Her account explains why disgust, unlike other emotions such as indignation and compassion, leads to systematically unjustified moral conclusions. However, I agree with Kelly that Nussbaum packs too much into her definition of disgust.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Kelly, disgust is not a symbolic rejection of animality and mortality, but a cognitive system that evolved to protect against poisons and parasites, which was later

co-opted to serve social functions such as marking group boundaries and enforcing community norms. Moral disgust does involve judgments that separate the morally pure from the morally impure, but not all occasions for moral or social disgust are aptly seen as irrational attempts to project unsavory aspects of one's own animality onto a subordinated out-group. For example, some conservative Republicans are disgusted by what they see as efforts by liberal Democrats to betray individualistic American values in favor of European-style socialism. This is not a merely metaphorical use of the term disgust. Haidt establishes empirically that disgust does play a role in conservative opposition to liberal values and policies (Haidt and Graham 2007).^{iv} It isn't that liberals must be seen as peculiarly animalistic, inhuman, or objectively similar to primary objects of disgust, but the perception that liberal values are un-American is expressed in bumper sticker slogans like "Take America Back." These slogans reflect the perception that liberal Democrats are threatening truly American principles and ways of life, and are used to motivate conservative voters to express their aversion to liberal politicians and their policies at the ballot box. In short, in this example as in countless others, disgust is a mechanism for the embodiment of values shared by a community, and is called to the defense of those values when they are threatened. Of course, this psychological point does not settle whether conservative values are justified. But it does illustrate Kelly's point that disgust plays a role in normal moral psychology by policing group boundaries and motivating the enforcement of group norms. In extreme forms, this psychological function can devolve into the outright denial of the humanity of opposing groups. But disgust does not necessarily include judgments of inhumanity, as Nussbaum's theory requires.

Nussbaum's theory seems particularly implausible with respect to cases of induced disgust, like the hypnosis experiment conducted by Wheatley and Haidt (2005). In the study, participants were hypnotized to feel disgust upon hearing a particular word such as "often." When they responded to vignettes describing politicians who "often" take bribes, or a graduate student who "often" chooses interesting topics of discussion, they were more likely to blame and prone to suggest more severe

punishments than controls. In these cases, it is implausible to suppose that respondents were projecting anxiety about animality and mortality. The judgments involved seem more prosaic – that the politician is sleazy, the graduate student “up to something,” etc. While Nussbaum could deny that these cases involve genuine disgust, on account of the absence of “projective” judgments likening their targets to primary objects of disgust, this maneuver seems ad hoc. One can be disgusted at a bribe-taking politician without questioning his humanity, or judging him to be peculiarly turd-like or similar to slimy slugs. Indeed, his corruption may be seen as all too human.

Kelly’s theory of disgust does a much better job of accommodating this point. In his view, “primary” or “core” objects of disgust are connected with the initial evolutionary function of disgust reactions, the avoidance of poisons and parasites. However, disgust was later coopted in our evolutionary history to serve social functions. In these functions, the objects of disgust are human beings and their behaviors, not the original objects associated with poisons and parasites. Rather than taking the objects of primary disgust to be included somehow in the *objects* of moral disgust, Kelly adopts the much more plausible position that primary objects of disgust were crucial to the evolution of disgust as a psychological mechanism. That mechanism can now be directed at other objects entirely, including other people, whose status as human beings needn’t be doubted.

Although Kelly has the more plausible theory of the nature of disgust,^v his theory does not justify disgust skepticism specifically. As I argued above, his reasons for being skeptical of disgust apply with equal weight to anger or indignation. Similarly, his objections to disgust would apply equally to any emotion that plays a normal role in the acquisition of moral norms from a cultural context.^{vi} At best, other emotions may be less prone to false positives than disgust. But this would be a matter of degree rather than kind. Because all moral emotions are functionally keyed to the acquisition of local norms, all moral emotions are capable of leading to conclusions that are morally unjustified. Kelly’s reasons for

being skeptical of disgust therefore generalize to other moral emotions. Therefore, to the extent that moral judgment typically involves emotion, as the dominant sentimentalist camp in moral psychology maintains (see, e.g., Haidt 2001), if Kelly has a case for skepticism at all, it is a case for global moral skepticism.^{vii} In other words, Kelly's skeptical argument does not justify singling out disgust-backed moral judgments for dismissive treatment compared to other moral judgments. If all moral emotions lack a reliable connection to moral justification, it would be both arbitrary and pointless to focus on disgust alone as a source of error in moral judgment, or as a target for psychological suppression.

Although I deny that Kelly succeeds in defending disgust skepticism, that is not to endorse disgust advocacy. Kelly is correct to insist that appeals to disgust do not carry weight *within* moral debate. As he says, citing your own disgust "is neither here nor there." But we don't need an empirically sophisticated theory of the nature of disgust to appreciate the truth of that claim. It's what Wittgensteinians used to call a grammatical point, back when there were still Wittgensteinians. Moral debate involves the assertion of norms, not appeals to personal feelings. Granted, if it weren't for moral emotions, no one would in fact care about norms. But that's a causal point about moral psychology, not an effort at moral justification. In short, disgust and other moral emotions are psychologically recruited in the acquisition and maintenance of moral norms generally, whether those norms are justified or unjustified. Consequently, explicit appeals to those emotions do not settle questions of justification. To think otherwise is to confuse causes and reasons. More specifically, it is to confuse the psychological causes of our responsiveness to norms as reasons for those norms. When moral justification is at issue, the focus is on the norms themselves, not the psychological mechanisms that enable us to acquire and maintain normative commitments.^{viii} But this point tells as much against disgust skepticism as it does against disgust advocacy: the fact that one feels disgust at the violation of a moral norm does not in and of itself augment or diminish the moral justification of that norm.

Kelly's discussion of a weakened form of disgust advocacy shows that he fails to appreciate this point. In its weaker version, disgust advocacy does not claim that disgust confers moral justification, but rather recommends that disgust should be exploited in moral education to enforce independently justified moral norms. Kelly explains:

One might, on the one hand, become convinced that feelings of disgust are not a trustworthy guide to ethical issues, that repugnance is morally irrelevant. At the same time, one could consistently hold that people should be disgusted by certain activities, practices, or groups that *are* genuinely morally problematic...One might further argue that given its powerful effects on judgment and motivation, mobilizing people's disgust against something like racism, or any other unseemly activity or unethical practice, might be both morally appropriate, as well as an effective way do away with the activity or practice...A Disgust Advocate might be tempted to go one step further, supporting, for instance, a publicly funded campaign aimed at lessening racism, that used the latest advertising and marketing techniques to depict racism and racists as not just wrong but disgusting. (176-7)

Kelly opposes even this weakened form of disgust advocacy because, as he puts it, "the slope from moralization to demonization and dehumanization is just too slippery to endorse even this form of Disgust Advocacy" (178). Kelly's argument suggests that the problem with such a campaign is that disgust is simply too dangerous to be the psychological mechanism that enforces any moral norm. I will have more to say about the alleged dangerousness of disgust below. However, Kelly is in no position to insist on this argument. According to his own theory of the social functions of disgust, enforcing moral norms is one of disgust's normal psychological roles. The problem with the weakened form of disgust advocacy is not that it grants a role to disgust in enforcing moral norms, but rather that it seeks to exploit primary, non-moral objects of disgust in order to bias moral judgment, skewing the normal moral functions of the emotion. In other words, the weak version of disgust advocacy seeks to cause moral

judgments by priming morally irrelevant disgust reactions, thereby interfering with the normal psychological mechanisms, including disgust at norm violations, that underlie moral judgment and reasoning about moral justification. For example, an anti-smoking campaign may achieve its aim of eliciting negative moral judgments about smoking by presenting grisly photos of blackened lungs or disfigured victims of oral cancer. But such a campaign works by focusing the viewer's attention on non-moral elicitors of disgust – the gore and goo of disease. It therefore operates like the greasy pizza boxes in the well-known study that showed sitting at a dirty desk intensifies moral blame (Schnall et.al. 2008). In short, the campaign biases moral judgment by priming non-moral disgust reactions, even if it causes the “right” conclusion. The weak version of disgust advocacy is therefore problematic because it exploits and corrupts the normal role of disgust in moral judgment, not because disgust is too dangerous to be involved in the psychological enforcement of moral norms.

Although I've denied that there is a necessary connection between disgust and dehumanization, there is no doubt that disgust does typically play a psychological role when one group seeks to dehumanize another. Rather than singling out disgust itself as the problem, however, we should be on our guard against attempts to bias moral judgment by priming non-moral disgust reactions. We should furthermore condemn divisive and dehumanizing norms, and seek to justify more inclusive moral norms by pointing out our shared humanity with others, the harms of discrimination, etc. These inclusive moral norms will then be embodied psychologically with the help of our moral emotions, including disgust.

Nussbaum, of course, would reject these recommendations. Given the disastrous harms that befall subordinated groups when they are dehumanized, she finds it necessary to root out completely disgust's role in moral judgment. Furthermore, Nussbaum would deny my claim that disgust is involved in the psychological embodiment of justified moral norms, on the grounds that disgust by definition involves false judgments about the inhumanity of out-groups. I've already responded to this point, arguing that she packs too much into the cognitive content of disgust. However, Nussbaum also claims

that disgust is both unnecessary and dangerously focused on persons rather than acts. On the first point, she writes that “We do not need to appeal to disgust to tell us that murder and cruelty are bad” (2004, 85). On the latter point, she notes that “Nothing is gained by treating any group of citizens like dirt, even if they are immoral” (ibid. 107).^{ix} That’s why she prefers the cultivation of indignation or anger over disgust:

disgust does not remain focused on an act. Anger at a bad act is compatible with the desire to rehabilitate the offender and with respect for the offender’s human dignity. Disgust, because of its core idea of contamination, basically wants to get the person out of sight...We should distinguish carefully between persons and their acts, blame people for any bad or harmful acts they commit, but retain a respect for them as persons, capable of growth and change. (ibid. 106)

Furthermore, Nussbaum needn’t say it is possible to replace disgust entirely with indignation in order to suggest that we should do so to the extent we are able.

Nussbaum’s case for the dangerousness of disgust relies heavily on her assumption, criticized above, that moral or “projective” disgust necessarily involves the judgment that its objects are subhuman. Independently of this point, however, I also reject Nussbaum’s stark distinction between the alleged dangerousness of disgust and the comparative safety of indignation. Nussbaum thinks disgust is worse than indignation because indignation focuses on the act rather than the agent. With its logic of contamination, disgust does admittedly tend to focus on the agent. But so do other moral emotions, including indignation. For example, consider the well-known “fundamental attribution error”: in explaining immoral actions, people are biased towards explanations in terms of enduring character traits over explanations in terms of situational factors (Gilbert and Malone 1995). As a result of this bias, we are prone to regard the objects of our anger or indignation as having intrinsically bad character, focusing on the person rather than the act. We can learn to lessen our susceptibility to the fundamental

attribution error, but doing so is a matter of correcting character-based explanations across the board, not of cultivating indignation rather than disgust. To the extent we manage to do so, a person who has done something disgusting can be reinstated into the moral community no less than a person who has done something to cause anger or indignation. As evidence of this, note that disgust reactions are empirically associated with the desire for cleansing or purification, and as simple an action as washing one's hands can significantly lessen feelings of disgust and associated guilt (Zhong and Liljenquist 2006). Cultural rituals of purification reflect the possibility of rehabilitation. If those rituals are denied to certain sub-groups that are seen as irredeemably inhuman or contaminated, that reflects a failure to adopt justifiably inclusive norms (encouraged, perhaps, by the fundamental attribution error), not an indication that disgust-eliciting acts can never be atoned for.

In addition to the charge of dangerousness, we've seen that Nussbaum also claims that disgust is unnecessary to morality. I concede Nussbaum's point that that we don't need explicit *appeals* to disgust in moral discourse to tell us such things as that murder and cruelty are bad. As I noted above in my discussion of Kelly, overt appeals to disgust do not count as moral justification and carry no weight as reasons. As such, the moral justification of norms against murder and cruelty will not cite disgust reactions, but will rather focus on the harm done to the victims, just as Nussbaum claims. But that's a point about moral justification, not moral psychology. Nussbaum's argument about justification does nothing to establish that disgust is inessential to our psychological capacity to embody moral norms. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Nussbaum is wrong to assume that morality would be improved if only we could rid ourselves of disgust. In fact, eliminating disgust's psychological role in moral judgment would likely impair our moral capacity, because the role disgust plays in the enforcement of moral norms does not appear to be an optional feature of human moral psychology. Regarding moral emotions generally, Damasio's studies of patients with injuries to emotional centers of the brain indicate that loss of the ability to feel social emotions undermines the capacity to maintain commitment

to moral norms (2003). Regarding disgust specifically, consider that the embodiment of moral norms requires an aversive reaction to norm transgressions, including the prospect of one's own transgressions. Kelly's defense of the co-opt thesis already provides convincing evidence that disgust is in fact one of the emotional mechanisms that plays this psychological role. In addition, psychologist Jonathan Haidt has long argued that disgust plays a central role in the ethic of divinity or purity (2003b). Liberal ethicists like Nussbaum may downplay the importance of purity norms, but disgust is also apparently involved in the psychological embodiment of fairness norms, which are central to liberal ethics.^x A recent study established that unfair offers in an economic game (the ultimatum game) elicit the same facial expression as typical elicitors of disgust (namely, bad tastes and photographs of contaminants) (Chapman et. al. 2009). The result of this study should not be surprising. For as Kelly points out, enforcing group identification is one of disgust's primary social functions, and shared moral norms are important markers of group identity.^{xi} This is true of liberals no less than conservatives, as is manifest in common liberal rhetoric: for example, conservative critics of homosexuality are called "homophobes," a term likening their opposition to homosexuality to a sickness that must be rooted out of a healthy body politic.^{xii} There is also neurological evidence that we may not be able to substitute indignation for disgust, as Nussbaum suggests. An fMRI study found that the emotions of disgust and indignation recruited overlapping brain regions in the frontal and temporal lobes (Moll et. al. 2005). This suggests that it may not be psychologically possible to disentangle disgust reactions and indignation reactions in the neat way Nussbaum requires.

But even if it were possible to eliminate or suppress the psychological role of disgust in favor of indignation, I'm not convinced that we should even if we could. According to Jonathan Haidt, disgust is one end of an emotional continuum, the other end of which is elevation (2003a, 2003b). Elevation is the emotionally positive side of commitment to norms. When we see others exemplify group norms, we feel inspired to follow their example, and drawn to bond with the community that shares those norms.

Whereas disgust motivates aversion and expulsion, elevation motivates approach and inclusion (Haidt 2003b, 863). Haidt argues that elevation is a positive emotion, but that we cannot have a sense of elevation unless we likewise have a sense of degradation. Disgust is the emotion that polices degradation. Without it, we can see nothing as beneath us. This is a feature of our moral psychology, and not something we have much of a choice about. The question is not whether morality should include concepts like degradation, as it inevitably does. Rather, the question is what ought properly to engage this sense. That is a question of which norms are the best norms – a properly ethical question – not a question about which moral emotions we should choose to enforce those norms. Disgust will enter into the psychological maintenance of even the most justified moral norms.^{xiii}

There is a deep irony in Nussbaum's calls for the elimination of disgust. She is motivated to her cause out of moral concern for members of persecuted out-groups who suffer from disgust-backed efforts to dehumanize them. In her view, disgust involves refusing to acknowledge one's humanity by projecting undesired traits onto out-groups. I have not denied that disgust is psychologically implemented in the service of hateful and divisive norms. But that's because disgust plays a role in the acquisition and maintenance of moral norms generally, including both morally bad norms and morally good ones. In her zeal to defend the persecuted, Nussbaum ironically denies an important aspect of her own humanity – the psychological role of disgust in the embodiment and maintenance of even her own moral norms. She finds disgust itself an undesirable trait, and projects it onto those she finds oppressive while falsely denying its role in the psychological embodiment of her own values. In the process, Nussbaum both caricatures her opponents, and hides from herself one of the important psychological underpinnings of her own commitment to moral norms.

In closing, it is important to re-emphasize that my argument against disgust skepticism does not commit me to disgust advocacy, as Kelly defines it. Feelings of disgust in moral contexts do generally

indicate that a norm one has internalized has been violated, but they do not justify that norm. Nor, however, should feelings of disgust raise a particular suspicion of error. At best, strong feelings of disgust merit the same kind of caution that strong emotions do generally: we should be on our guard against emotion-induced errors involving all emotions, but this is a matter of the proper regulation of emotion, not its elimination or suppression. I accordingly concede to Nussbaum and Kelly that we should be attuned to the possibility that misplaced disgust reactions may be driving particular moral judgments, especially when those judgments are manipulatively primed by non-moral reactions to primary objects of disgust. I even concede to Nussbaum that morality is best promoted by the encouragement of more positive emotions like compassion.^{xiv} Positive emotions broaden the moral community, whereas negative emotions like disgust and (pace Nussbaum) indignation tend to narrow it.^{xv} But that does not mean that we can or should live without moral disgust. If nothing is beneath us, if nothing engages our sense of degradation, we have lost a considerable motive to virtue.

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ⁱ Kelly's distinction between disgust skeptics and disgust advocates was first introduced in his unpublished manuscript "The Ethics of Disgust" (Kelly 2009), which is available on-line at <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/KellyEthicsOfDisgustRoMESubmission.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Kelly dubs Nussbaum's account the "terror management theory." For another recent theory that emphasizes disgust's connection to concerns about animality and mortality, see McGinn (2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelly includes judgments of offensiveness as part of core disgust (2011, 21), but he does not enter explicitly into the philosophical debate within the philosophy of emotion between cognitivists like Nussbaum and non-cognitivists such as Jesse Prinz (2004), who claim that emotions should be defined

independently of judgments and their cognitive contents. If non-cognitivism is true, Nussbaum's case for disgust skepticism is undermined from the start by her reliance on cognitivism. I express my reservations about Prinz's non-cognitivism in (author 2007).

^{iv} Although Haidt argues that liberals rely less than conservatives on disgust-backed norms, this does not mean liberal norms do not recruit disgust at all in their enforcement. On this point, I can attest anecdotally that my liberal wife reliably exhibits the gape face whenever she sees or hears conservative Sarah Palin.

^v Another advantage of Kelly's account is that it is more inclusive. Nussbaum intentionally excludes non-cognitive criteria from her definition of emotion (2001), including elements such as facial expressions and aversive behaviors that would be included by any theory that incorporates the general idea of an affect program (see Ekman 1992 for the idea of an affect program). In my view, any adequate account of disgust must include both cognitive and non-cognitive elements.

^{vi} This is true with respect to any theory of moral justification outside a thorough-going relativistic theory that defines justification in terms of consonance with local moral norms. But if moral justification is defined in such a relativistic manner, disgust will prove to be much more positively correlated with moral justification than Kelly's discussion suggests. At the very least, he would in that case owe a comparative analysis of the reliability of disgust and other moral emotions to justify skepticism about disgust in particular. In any case, Kelly does not appear to hold such a relativistic theory. For example, without any cultural restriction, he says he has "no doubt" that the judgment that racism is wrong is morally justified (2009, 14; 2011, 177).

^{vii} For an example of a global skeptical hypothesis based on evolutionary considerations, see Joyce (2006). I embrace sentimentalism but do not accept global moral skepticism, though it would take me too far afield to argue for that position in this paper.

^{viii} People who find themselves unable to articulate a defense of a disputed norm will sometimes appeal explicitly to disgust. This phenomenon is illustrated by Haidt's well-known study of "moral dumb-founding" (2001). Most participants in the study believe that incest is wrong, and are disgusted by a vignette describing a brother and sister who violate the norm against incest. When asked to justify their moral judgment, they typically offer reasons that the experimenter goes on to refute. For example, if the study participants express concerns about birth defects, they are informed that the brother and sister used redundant methods of birth control, and did not conceive a pregnancy. When the study participants run out of reasons, they sometimes declare that incest is gross or disgusting. But at this point, they themselves realize that they are out of reasons, a point aptly captured by Haidt's characterization of their predicament as one of "dumb-founding." In practice, the comment "That's disgusting" expresses commitment to a norm, but does nothing to justify it.

^{ix} Note that this passage illustrates Nussbaum's tendency, criticized above, to think that moral or "projective" disgust necessarily likens its objects to "primary" objects of disgust like dirt, trash, and slimy slugs.

^x Indeed, disgust reactions are evoked by a stunning variety of transgressions. Consider the following list from McGinn (2010, 37): "Lastly, we must consider moral disgust proper—the kind we feel when we condemn an action with special venom. In this category, I want to include what might be called intellectual disgust—the kind we feel (some of us) about intellectual performances that fall well short of proper intellectual standards. The category thus ranges from our reactions to, say, a particularly deplorable financial fraud to what we feel about a piece of shabby writing (possibly our own). Here is a representative list of the kinds of vice that typically excite such reactions: cheating, corruption, cruelty, bullying, deception, selfishness, hypocrisy; confusion, sloppiness, laziness, pretentiousness, evasiveness, obscurity, sophistry, prolixity, cliché, plagiarism, bad grammar. Flinging a piece of shoddy writing across

the room, so as to remove it from one's sight, would be a clear case of intellectual or literary disgust (for some reason student essays come to mind at this point)."

^{xi} Deigh (2006) makes a similar argument in his trenchant critique of Nussbaum. He points out that group members are disgusted when one of their number violates shared norms, as when the corruption of bribe-taking politicians sullies our shared commitment to democracy. Deigh argues that Nussbaum's real disagreement with Devlin, who sees disgust as a valid basis for restricting behavior through the criminal law, is at root political. According to Deigh, Devlin is right that disgust is psychologically central to the maintenance of group norms. But Deigh agrees with Nussbaum that society can remain sufficiently cohesive without inflicting the harms associated with criminalizing behavior such as homosexuality. Deigh's argument reinforces my point that our focus should be on evaluating the norms disgust is recruited to embody, rather than casting disgust itself as the problem.

^{xii} A recent *Politico* story provides anecdotal support for liberal disgust at racism. On November 1st 2011, comedienne Sarah Silverman hosted a comedy show in Austin, Texas with the title "Live from Niggerhead: Stripping the Paint Off of Good Old-Fashioned Racism." The title is a reference to the former name of Texas Governor Rick Perry's family hunting camp. Silverman was quoted as saying "The fact that Perry enjoyed family a family hunting lodge with this name is gross, the fact that it barely made news or had consequences is dangerous." Here Silverman is clearly disgusted with Governor Perry, and is calling on her fellow liberals and Americans to shun Perry as a Presidential candidate.

^{xiii} At a conference in November 2008 ("On the Human," sponsored by the National Humanities Center in Durham, NC), Nussbaum discussed a Hindu pogrom against Muslims in which Muslim women were raped with metal phalluses. She argued that these atrocities were made possible by disgust, as the Hindu men projected their own fears about animality onto Moslem women, and were consequently able to act with utter inhumanity towards them. Of course I agree that such a pogrom is morally outrageous. But is indignation alone the proper, or even possible, psychological response? This atrocity engages the

moral emotions of those who value tolerance and human dignity. We rightly conclude, it seems to me, that such actions are degrading to all concerned. We rightly conclude that it would be wrong to tolerate the actions of individuals who promote such atrocities. Disgust, not indignation alone, is among the emotional mechanisms that underlie our psychological capacity us to reach these conclusions and act upon them.

^{xiv} Cf. William Ian Miller's characterization of love as the suspension of disgust (1997).

^{xv} On this point, see Frederickson's "broaden and build" theory of positive emotion (2001). She argues that the psychological function of negative emotions like indignation and disgust is to narrow cognitive and behavioral options, typically in response to a threat. Positive emotions like compassion, on the other hand, broaden cognitive and behavioral options, and build new relationships. Frederickson cites evidence that positive emotions are good for us, building resilience and other positive psychological qualities. But her approach is not fairly characterized as a form of skepticism about negative emotions: she grants that they serve an important function in responding to threats. Rather, her strategy is to encourage our capacity for positive emotions.