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A DANGER TO A JUST SOCIETY? A HOLISTIC VIEW ON DISGUST

We are emotional beings. Every action we take and every thought we have comes with emotions. Speculating on what the meaning of a 'just society' should be for human beings, however general such a theme may be, therefore requires a focus on emotions. In the next few pages, I shall limit my analysis to the relationship that obtains between disgust and the idea of a just society. *Contra* Martha C. Nussbaum (2006; 2010), who argues that disgust "pose[s] dangers to a just society" (Nussbaum 2006, 70), I shall contend that disgust can either damage or promote the construction of a just society. Indeed, I largely agree with Nussbaum's perspective on disgust, but I put forward the idea that disgust is not necessarily dangerous for a just society, but can also be useful and constitute an important element for its construction. In order to justify my claim, first, I will comment on Nussbaum's criticism of disgust. Second, I will analyse Rozin and Fallon's (1987) seminal study on disgust, which Nussbaum fully presupposes. Third, I will propose a slightly different, indeed 'holistic' view on disgust, and bring forward some arguments for the use of disgust in order to construct a just society.

1. Martha C. Nussbaum on Disgust, Law, and Society: A Summary and a Few Remarks

Martha C. Nussbaum devoted at least two books (2006; 2010) to the relationship between disgust, politics, and the law. In those works, she also addressed the topic of a just society, which she conceives of as a liberal society, where every person can lead a flourishing life thanks to certain basic rights and liberties valid for all citizens. Such rights and liberties are supposed to be grounded neither on metaphysical conceptions nor on religious or secular assumptions. Rather, they should be the result of an "overlapping consensus" among the holders of different perspectives on how life should be lived, provided that they endorse at least the fundamental idea of "the equal worth of persons, and their liberty"

(Nussbaum 2006, 62). By this way, political culture only retains the sharable values among these different views without taking any stands on contending matters (e.g., with regard to religion, the nature of the soul, etc.; Nussbaum 2006, 62). Thus it is all but difficult to see why the political liberalism defended by Nussbaum has a strong interest in the role of the law for a just society to be established and preserved, and why, accordingly, disgust is highly problematic for this political stance. While the law should protect the rights, liberties and primary goods of all citizens, disgust seems to undermine the very idea that, among citizens, there should be full equality in worth and liberty. From this point of view, disgust “pose[s] dangers to a just society” (Nussbaum 2006, 70) since it is “in many respects especially antithetical to the values of a liberal society” (Nussbaum 2006, 321), whose fabric is the law and whose guiding commitments are “reciprocity and mutual respect, including respect for differing conception of the ultimate good of life” (Nussbaum 2006, 321).

Now, the problem arises because disgust “plays a powerful role in the law” (Nussbaum 2006, 72). Nussbaum aims to engage in a cultural battle against this “institutional” role of disgust, so to speak, which “figures, first, as the primary or even the sole justification for making an act illegal” (Nussbaum 2006, 72). This is a problem of both cultural (in a large sense) and a juridical (in a technical sense) relevance insofar as, whether or not we are aware of it, disgust also plays a powerful role in our lives and consequently it can both be elicited during a legal process or be one of the deep reason for supporting or making a law (e.g., the law against obscenity, sodomy and same-sex marriage, etc.). If the law must protect citizens first of all because of their dignity as citizens, then it cannot be driven by an emotion that first and foremost attacks and insults said dignity. This criticism of disgust finds its concrete exemplification in Nussbaum (2010), where she focuses on “the ways in which [disgust] has been used politically through history” (Nussbaum 2010, 15) in order to subordinate vulnerable minorities and contend that constitutional law has “a significant role to play in the transformation” of social attitudes starting from the specific theme of the sexual orientation (Nussbaum 2010, 21).

Nussbaum (2006) provides at least three arguments to clarify why disgust is antithetical to the values of a liberal society. The first two arguments rely on Rozin and Fallon’s seminal paper on disgust (1987; s. next section). Nussbaum explicitly refers to their

study when she states that disgust “does not well track genuine danger” and that “it is bound up with irrational forms of magical thinking” (Nussbaum 2006, 122). These are respectively the first and the second argument against the reliability of disgust in relation to making an act illegal. The first argument claims that disgust is unreliable for legal purposes because its elicitors do not always coincide with something genuinely dangerous. In line with Rozin and Fallon, Nussbaum brings attention to the fact that disgust is not the same as danger and, therefore, fear. While dangerous items can be tolerated in my environment and stop being dangerous as soon as their danger element has been removed, disgusting ones cannot be tolerated, nor are they less disgusting after all danger was removed (Nussbaum 2006, 88). Disgust, at most, “provides an additional emphasis to the sense of danger [...] even though the disgusting does not map precisely onto the dangerous” (Nussbaum 2006, 95). If there is no genuine danger underlying a reaction of disgust, one cannot use it as a justification to establish whether or not an act is illegal, because there is no actual reason for such a justification. Following Rozin and Fallon (1987, 29-30), Nussbaum puts forward a second argument against disgust, that of “magical thinking”. Disgust is elicited by objects that are perceived as contaminants. Yet, an object does not need to be a contaminant *per se* in order to elicit disgust, but it suffices that we *think that* the object is contaminating to feel disgust. Rozin and Fallon call this phenomenon “psychological contamination”, and classify it as a form of magical thinking, that is to say, a pattern of thought that projects the property of being contaminating on both disgusting objects or objects that had past contact with disgusting objects, be they really contaminants or not. Accordingly, it is no surprise that Nussbaum states that disgust does not provide “the disgusted person with a set of reasons that can be used for purposes of public persuasion” (Nussbaum 2006, 101). Disgust thus entails a magical root that makes it unreliable for legal purposes.

The third reason for rejecting disgust within a legal framework is strictly political. Nussbaum distrusts disgust insofar as it serves an “elaborate social engineering” (Nussbaum 2006, 110) that puts some groups down (e.g., Jews in late nineteenth century Europe) by distancing them from the dominant group, which describes them “in such a way that they came to be found disgusting” (Nussbaum 2006, 111). In other words, disgust colludes with

social and political forces that deny dignity to some persons and groups (usually the more vulnerable ones). This is at odds with the values of a liberal society because a group (the dominant group, e.g., healthy German males grown-up during the late nineteenth century) considers another group (the downgraded group, e.g., Jews at the time) neither as entitled to the same rights nor as worthy as it is. Disgust can foster the prohibition of harmless acts or even (as has happened) make it so that harmless people are legally treated as criminals by means of the law itself.

In Nussbaum's perspective, therefore, disgust does not foster discriminatory behaviours on the basis of a genuine danger but because of a psychical and culturally mediated idea of contagion. Its claim sounds like this: "This act (or, more often and usually inseparably, this person) is a contaminant; it (he or she) pollutes our community. We would be better off if this contamination were kept far away from us" (Nussbaum 2006, 122-123). Still, since disgust relies on cultural and irrational beliefs, this claim has no value at all in making disgust a valid criterion to establish which acts should or should not be prohibited. Following Rozin and Fallon, Nussbaum believes that disgust "begins with a group of core objects, which are seen as contaminants because they are seen as reminders of our mortality and animal vulnerability" (Nussbaum 2006, 93). The disgusting object is a "reminder" of human mortality and vulnerability as an animal, issues that Nussbaum – like most – considers really difficult to live with (Nussbaum 2006, 95). Yet, neither all animals nor those traits that we share with them are always disgusting. In this sense, distancing herself from Rozin and Fallon's account (s. next section), Nussbaum (2006, 92) contends that decay is the crucial concept that allows to properly connect mortality and animal vulnerability with disgust. Disgusting beings remind us that we are vulnerable and mortal insofar as they are rotting or are phenomenally similar to rotting beings (e.g., insects). Furthermore, if we come into contact with such things (or persons), we would be contaminated by them, that is to say, we would come to be transformed into them. However, these are cultural biases and irrational thoughts: the truth, according to Nussbaum, is that we desperately struggle against our own humanity, to the point of "hiding from [our own] humanity", as the title of Nussbaum's book (2006) points out.

Though consistent and compelling, I do not find Nussbaum's view on disgust really convincing. Her goal being to delegitimize

both the more or less explicit presence of disgust behind some laws and the idea that such an emotion can provide a good criterion for establishing that something is illegal or even criminal, these two purposes converge with her struggle against social engineering and discrimination. However, the very reason for acknowledging that disgust plays a powerful and central role in these issues is all but clear. According to Nussbaum, the concept of (psychological) “contamination” should provide such a reason and, at the same time, the reason for getting rid of disgust in the (public) contexts she considers. Were disgust the emotion that reacts to contaminants, which are seen as such mostly due to cultural and psychological biases, then disgust would not give us true information about our environment and the beings that inhabit it, and would therefore be disqualified from constituting a potential resource for judging it in any possible sense, let alone for a group to downgrade other groups. What seems to be troubling in this hypothesis is that Nussbaum puts together two fully different dimensions: that of psychological life and that of social life. As her understanding of disgust shows, she seems to take for granted that these two layers of human life are somehow contiguous and function in the same way. In other words, she overlaps the way in which disgust works in our own life with the way in which it works and spreads socially.

Accordingly, Jews, homosexuals, women, lower-class people, and all downgraded human groups would have been discriminated only because of their (imagined) contaminating properties, which not only would remind the dominant (disgusted) group of its vulnerability, animality and mortality, but would ultimately weaken it. Though, I would contend that Nussbaum’s tight analogy (not to say identity) between socio-political and psychological (personal) disgust is implausible. Nussbaum states: “So powerful is the desire to cordon ourselves off from our animality that we often don’t stop at feces, cockroaches, and slimy animals. We need a group of humans to bound ourselves against, who will come to exemplify the boundary line between the truly human and the basely animal” (Nussbaum 2006, 107). Let us focus on this “need [of] a group of humans to bound ourselves against”. According to Nussbaum, it arises because of the desire to separate oneself that underlies disgust itself. Now, consider a group of teenagers that bully one or more of their schoolmates by insulting them and attributing to them several disgusting properties. There is probably

no disgust at play here. In this case, the trigger is a sort of power struggle grounded on a need for self-affirmation that is widely common at that age, fostering the creation of groups and making the dominant ones downgrade the vulnerable. Disgust is a simple mean (likely the most popular one) for discriminating, a means that does not need to be actually felt in order to be used. The social and cultural discourses and behaviours motivated by disgust and connected to this emotion can be detached from the actual experience of it and be used for discrimination purposes. Self-affirmation as well as power dynamics among teens can easily be understood as a need to hide from vulnerability in Nussbaum's sense, a need that discriminatory behaviours satisfy psychologically (by reinforcing one's own self-esteem) and socially (by providing social consideration).

In cases like these, however, it is clear that disgust does not play any role as an actual emotion. Instead, people refer to it in order to both affirm themselves and mask their real intention, which could be morally reproached or even legally prosecuted. Consider Nussbaum's example of the German Jews during Nazism: "It is not because in some intrinsic way Jews were actually or 'originally' or 'primarily' found disgusting that they came to be associated with stereotypes of the disgusting. The causality is more the other way around: it was because there was a need to associate Jews [...] with stereotypes of the animal [...] that they were represented and talked about in such a way that they came to be found disgusting" (Nussbaum 2006, 110-111). Again, the point is to investigate the 'need' that is able to make someone disgusting. As I have briefly shown, the reasons and affective qualities that lie behind such social phenomenon cannot be identical with the actual reaction that one experiences before something disgusting. Consequently, in Nussbaum's words, the disgusting may be a plausible reason for hiding my humanity, but it is no plausible reason for hiding the humanity of a group – let alone a whole social body. But Nussbaum's understanding of disgust presents other problems: first of all, with regards to the idea of a just society, she only describes disgust as a negative emotion. I aim to question exactly this point. In order to do that, in the next section, I will consider Rozin and Fallon's seminal study on disgust, which is the basis of Nussbaum's own thesis.

2. Rozin and Fallon's 'A Perspective on Disgust:' A Critical Reading in Search of a Holistic View.

Taking distance from Nussbaum's account on disgust involves a critical consideration of Rozin and Fallon's own perspective. Let us start from their definition of this emotion: "Revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object. The offensive objects are contaminants; that is, if they even briefly contact an acceptable food, they tend to render that food unacceptable" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 23). Therefore, disgust is an emotion that has a defensive function: it defends us from incorporating offensive objects. Rozin and Fallon's article mainly consists in exploring the critical terms of their definition: (1) oral incorporation into the self, (2) offensive object, (3) contaminant/contagion (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 24). In this section I will comment on their analyses of these concepts and try to bring forward a slightly different "perspective on disgust".

Generally speaking, Rozin and Fallon consider disgust a particular type of food rejection. They claim that disgust is a food-related emotion and that disgusting items are potential foods or things that could contaminate foods. Still, the very reason for such a rejection is to be found in what they call "ideational factors", that is to say "on the knowledge of the origin or the nature of the food, illustrated by the rejection of a grasshopper just because it is a grasshopper" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 24). This means that the ideational factor is cultural: it pertains to the very idea (be it true or not) that we have about a certain object. In this case, that the object is a contaminant and, therefore, disgusting. In other words, we perceive an object as negative (in this case, as disgusting) because, according to our knowledge of its origin or nature, we see it as offensive. Yet, this knowledge of the origin or nature of the object comes from the culture we have grown up and live in: thus, we know that an object is offensive (i.e., disgusting) only because we have been taught that it has an offensive nature or origin inasmuch as it is contaminating and therefore disgusting. Nevertheless, despite this strong cultural component, Rozin and Fallon do not concede that disgust is fully reducible to a cultural construction. Instead, there is a strong psycho-biological basis that allows the ideational factors underlying disgust to take root. As we shall see, the two psychologists also inquire into how these two dimensions of disgust intertwine with each other.

Indeed, the first point to clarify in Rozin and Fallon's definition of disgust is that of "oral incorporation". This term indicates the first psycho-biological element that has to be analysed in order to produce a correct account of disgust. According to them, the oral incorporation in the self always implies cutting across the very border of the body and, consequently, the border between self and non-self (Rozin and Fallon 1987). Now, Rozin and Fallon explain why disgust focuses on the mouth and on oral incorporation by hypothesizing the existence of a "simple and primitive notion" that they call "unacknowledged belief", according to which "one assumes the properties of what one ingests" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 27). In short, human beings universally seem to believe that "you are what you eat", and consequently they expect "ingestion of offensive (say, disgusting) objects to cause one to become offensive (debased) in some way. The act of ingestion would transfer the offensiveness to the self" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 27). By way of explanation, the underlying idea is that, just as an acceptable food becomes unacceptable if it enters in contact with a disgusting object, so human beings, if contacted by such objects, become as unacceptable.

Were Rozin and Fallon right, the focus of disgust on the oral incorporation of an object should be motivated by a much deeper focus on the self. Surprisingly, they do not stress this aspect of the issue. Instead, they only underscore the close connection between oral incorporation and the nature of the offensive object, which is the second term they aim to clarify in their contribution. Rozin and Fallon (1987, 27-28) state that disgust has an animal focus, that is to say, that it is mainly directed to animals, parts of animals and (human and animal) bodily wastes. When non-animal objects are disgusting – the two psychologists state – they normally had contact with, or are similar to, those entities: "In addition to the claim that all disgusts are of animal origin, we believe that *all* animals and animal products are potentially disgusting. That is, at some basic level (and perhaps at some point in human evolution) animalness was a necessary and sufficient condition for disgust" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 28). They support their statement with some arguments concerning the fact that human beings universally eat only a small part of the available (and nutritional) animal species. Subsequently, eating animals would be the exception to the general rule according to which human beings do not normally eat animals (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 28). On this basis, they

argue for the tight connection between animals and food: animals appear to be really disgusting insofar as they may become food to be eaten by humans. Indeed:

Why animals? If we assume that there is a widespread belief that people take on the properties of what they eat, we must explain why animals, but not plants, are disgusting. Perhaps our greater similarity to animals makes it more likely that we would take on their properties. The fact that they produce feces may also be important. [...] In contrast to plants, animals seem to have more relevant and salient characteristics of the sort that might be expressed in a human. Another explanation assumes that humans see themselves as quite distinct from (and superior to) other animals and wish to avoid any ambiguity about their status by accentuating the human-animal boundary. (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 28)

One of the problems of Rozin and Fallon's interpretation consists in giving an account of this animal focus of disgust. Why are animals disgusting, but plants aren't? Their first answer resides in the idea of similarity: "perhaps", they write, humans acknowledge their greater similarity to animals than to plants. This hypothesis is consistent with the idea that we are endowed with an unacknowledged belief that leads us both to behave and to unconsciously assume that we take on the properties of what we eat. Therefore, our greater similarity to animals makes it more likely for us to take on their properties by eating them, to the (ideal) extent of the suppression of our difference from them.

Rozin and Fallon add a second hypothesis to account for the strict relationship between animalness and disgust: humans see themselves as distinct from (which may imply superior to) other animals and wish to accentuate such difference. This hypothesis is also consistent with the idea that "we are what we eat", since eating animals would reduce the perceived distance between humans and animals. Both explanations highlight the humans' belief in their difference from animals and their effort to keep such difference clear and neat, and this appears to be the very meaning of disgust according to the two psychologists. One may add that, behind such a (conflictual) relationship with animals, which humans normally are thought of as being akin to, it is possible to recognise a problem of identity and difference – a problem that disgust immediately raises and makes explicit.

This becomes even clearer if we follow Rozin and Fallon's list of other possible theories that challenge their own, in view of a

full account of disgust. The first concurrent theory is that of “spoilage and decay” (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 28). It affirms that spoiled and decayed items are elicitors of disgust. In order to link it to the “animal focus” hypothesis, Rozin and Fallon immediately connect these items to animals, which all are potentially decayed, and add that many of them consume decayed material or garbage and produce putrid faeces. However, they state that, alone, this theory cannot account for the full range of disgusts, even though they do not say why. Instead, they do not observe that, if this theory accounts for at least a part of disgust phenomena, it invalidates Rozin and Fallon’s presupposition that disgust has to do first and foremost with oral incorporation. Indeed, spoiled and decayed materials are perceived as disgusting because one might come into contact with them (most of the time), rather than because one might eat them. Here, of course, eating can be understood as a borderline case of touching. Consequently, this theory seems to urge us to change Rozin and Fallon’s formulation of the unacknowledged belief from “you are what you eat” to “you are what you touch”. However one may put it, this is, once again, a matter of identity.

The second concurrent theory Rozin and Fallon consider is that of the “Distance from humans”. According to the two psychologists, such a theory can be summarised in the idea that “accepted sexual partners and accepted foods are at ‘intermediate distances’ from the self. It follows that food items and persons either very close or very far from a person are rejected” (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 29). Once again, the theory of “intermediate distances” between humans and the accepted items accounts for some disgusting objects, but not all. Rozin and Fallon argue that “only a small minority of animals at ‘intermediate distances’ are usually acceptable as food, and many ‘distant’ animals such as shellfish and other invertebrates are commonly consumed” (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 29). This is a convincing argument, though it is easy to see that they understand the idea of “distance” in a very literal way. On the contrary, one may argue for a culturally mediated understanding of this concept, and therefore as an “ideational” concept of distance, to make use of Rozin and Fallon’s own conceptual background. This may complicate their view to the purpose of highlighting that categories such as “close to” and “far from” a person (and, I would add, a given society) are directly connected with the following two couples of categories: identity

and belongingness (closeness) and difference and extraneousness (farness). As the “animal focus” hypothesis also points out, the problem with disgust is that disgusting beings are not totally different from humans. By addressing the issue of the “intermediate distance” of the disgusting object from human beings, this hypothesis stresses the importance to know how humans conceive of themselves in a given culture in order to know the class of disgusting objects in that culture. In other words, the study of the way a culture teaches to humans who they are seems to provide instruments to recognise what in that same culture is thought to be disgusting. Once more, if I am right, what seems to be at stake with disgust is a matter of identity and difference.

The third concurrent theory Rozin and Fallon consider is that of “anomaly”, which is drawn from Mary Douglas’ influential study on purity and danger (1966). Though Douglas does not focus on disgust but on tabooed and polluting objects, Rozin and Fallon think that her analyses might have implications for understanding disgust: “Her view is based on the assumed predilection of humans to create clear-cut classifications of the objects in their world. Anomalous items, such as those that are unique or those that simultaneously instantiate properties of different classes, are disturbing and hence become the objects of taboo or pollution” (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 29). Hypothesising a clear relationship between polluting items and disgusting ones, Rozin and Fallon wonder whether this theory provides a full explanation of disgust. Accordingly, they wonder whether one could speak of a disgusting object in terms of an object that instantiates properties partaking to different classes (what Douglas calls “anomaly”) among those which a given culture endows its members with in order to give them a clear-cut classification of the object in their world. As one might expect, their answer is no: they do not believe that the anomaly theory provides a full account of disgust. In fact, disgusting items do not easily fall under the category of “anomaly” insofar as they are for the most part common objects of our experience (e.g., insects; Rozin and Fallon 1987, 29). Rozin and Fallon’s objection unveils the necessity that, for something to be disgusting, it must be such that at least one of its properties belongs to our common environment. Disgusting objects are indeed mostly objects that belong to our ordinary experience. Notwithstanding that I might have never seen the disgusting object before (in this sense it would be probably an anomalous object as well), such ob-

ject might be called disgusting and experienced as such only if it has at least one property (e.g., sliminess) that elicits disgust in me. But, sticking to Rozin and Fallon's conceptual framework, the very reason why such properties elicit disgust consists in the ideational factor. In this sense, one may conclude that, notwithstanding that I might have never seen the disgusting object before, the latter might be called disgusting and experienced as such only if it has at least one property (e.g., sliminess) that I 'consider' disgusting, more or less consciously. Again, analysing disgust from this point of view focuses on what belongs to me and my environment – something that, as I shall contend in the concluding section of my paper, is strictly linked to the question concerning the way I conceive myself.

The fourth and last theory scrutinised by Rozin and Fallon (1987, 29) is that of "The primary disgust substance", that is the "feces", which are considered "close to being a universal disgust" and "probably the first object of disgust to appear". The two psychologists are very cautious with regard to this thesis and provide elements against the intuitive (and naive) evidence that it brings with it (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 36). Despite such evidence, in fact, disgust before feces seems to be no "innate rejection" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 33), so it becomes difficult to decide whether feces are really entitled to be the first or primary object of disgust, although it is clear that they belong to the first objects one learns to treat as disgusting. This process is dealt with in the section called "The Ontogeny of Disgust", which is indeed very interesting inasmuch as it shows the crucial role of disgust in cultural transmission (between parents and children) and value acquisition. In this section it becomes clear that disgust only appears properly after the age of 8, when children are able to justify their rejection for something in terms of its nature or origin and when they can manage the category of "contamination" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 34-35), i.e. the third term defining disgust for the two psychologists, which we shall consider below. However, Rozin and Fallon state that "the most likely process [for the acquisition of the disgust] is transmission of the disgust experience from one person to another (e.g., parent to child). There is evidence that something like this in fact happens inasmuch as disgust-contamination sensitivity measures between parents and their young children show substantial positive correlations" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 36; s. Stevenson et al. 2010 for an up-to-date account on this theme).

The ontogeny of disgust shows that disgust is acquired by interpersonal transmission. This process, of course, requires the child's long-lasting cognitive development in order to really occur. At the same time, this long-lasting development is not simply biological but also cultural, since children grow up in a 'family' (be it composed by their natural parents or not) that teaches them what are the items that constitute their world and how to live in and relate to it. This implies that, at least in this case, natural development and cultural development of children overlap. Consequently, the primary objects of disgust should also be conceived of as the outcome of this complex process that takes place in relation to our environment and, especially, our social environment. This point has the greatest implications for my critical reading of Rozin and Fallon's "Perspective on Disgust" because, in their theoretical framework, there is room to connect the development of disgust in young humans with their cognitive development.

Despite the special focus on disgust, one cannot overlook that it cannot be conceived of as a separate part of human psychic and cognitive life, which has no relation with the other parts and with the whole ontogenetic development of humans. Rather, it seems more plausible to think of disgust as if, at the same time, it contributed to shape, and were shaped by, the person one has become in a given culture as well as in a given (social) environment. Indeed, growing up in culture is not a neutral fact for how one conceives of and 'sense' who one is. Think of language, a phenomenon that is both universal and strictly cultural: according to the human ontogenetic developmental programme, on the physiological side, it urges one's facial muscles to learn some movement, instead of others, in order to pronounce this or that vocal, syllable, word and proposition, and, on the psychological side, it urges one to learn precise social and grammatical rules for communication purposes, which are rarely reproducible in other languages, even very similar ones (e.g., French and Italian). At the end of this social training, one has been substantially shaped, that is to say, one becomes a 'native speaker' of a certain language, which one calls 'mother tongue', a language that mediates everything one experiences and even seems to coalesce with it. Thus, a given language, formerly alien, has become 'mine'. Something 'cultural' has become 'natural' for me. Disgust seems to work in a very similar

way¹: on the one side, it is difficult to say whether there are (and what are the) innate objects for this kind of rejection, but, on the other side, it is universal in human beings; disgusting objects vary from culture to culture; one learns (socially shared) appropriate responses to disgust, and, when they are not appropriate, they are frequently stigmatised by mockery and derision. At any rate, disgust comes to be ‘natural’ as well, it becomes part of the equipment I have developed in order to face life and relate with the environment I belong to. Once again, it has become ‘mine’. This means that it is one of my most intimate belongings, just as my language: it deeply characterises who I am and, at the same time, it unveils the group and the environment in which I grew up and am now living.

My claim is that Rozin and Fallon do not make use of conceptual tools that are able to really consider disgust under the light of the several processes underlying the development of the personal subject (ultimately, the *Ego*, the ‘I’), influencing each other and, finally, shaping a person, including her personal instance of disgust along with other personal characteristics. This conception leads one to think differently of what disgust is: it is not a single mechanism that develops by itself independently from other mechanism and from unforeseen events (e.g., external accidents as well as free choices), but rather a part of a whole, which likely could not even be thought of without such a whole. I call this view about disgust “holistic view”. The holistic view on disgust states that disgust cannot be adequately thought of without involving the whole human being and her development into consideration. This does not mean, at least not necessarily, that one cannot say anything about disgust without explaining the relationship that disgust entertains with the other parts of the whole (the human being) and their development. Rather, it means that one is committed to think of disgust in its dynamic involvement in the human being as a whole.

The difference of the holistic view from the others becomes clear after considering the third term that defines Rozin and Fallon’s concept of disgust: “Contamination”. By this word, they mean the offensiveness that one feels when experiencing disgust in front of disgusting objects. According to the authors, “we use the word *contamination* to refer to psychological contamination,

¹ For the analogy between disgust and language see Knapp (2003) and the critical remarks on Knapp’s view made by Gert (2005).

that is, people's interpretation of or response to situations in which physical contamination may have occurred" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 29).² Rozin and Fallon understand contamination as a psychical process that may have a physical starting point (e.g. the contact between a disgusting substance and an acceptable food), but that, even in this case, does not really grasp *per se* a real contamination. Accordingly, however disgusting anything may appear, there is no such thing as an appropriate reaction of disgust to it in a realistic sense, that is to say, there are no disgusting items (be they properties or objects) out there in the world.³

² Incidentally, it is worth observing that this passage provides the theoretical and experimental basis for Nussbaum's thesis that disgust does not provide the disgusted person with a set of reasons that can be used for public purposes, namely the thesis from which I started my contribution.

³ This description of disgust does not really disagree with the widely accepted idea that the evolutionary (phylogenetic) function of disgust is that of a disease-avoidance mechanism. Recent studies and much evidence (Curtis and Biran 2001; 2013; Kelly 2011; Sarabian *et al.* 2017) have indubitably reinforced the idea that disgust, at its core, has its proper and universal objects. Such evidence suggests that disgust «should be viewed [...] as a system that evolved to detect signs of pathogens and other infectious agents, as well as to stimulate the expression of behaviours that reduce the risk of their acquisition» (Sarabian *et al.* 2017, 2). In these perspectives, the biological evolution of disgust is seen as crucial for its ontogeny and becomes the very basis for its development and its subsequent cultural variation and extension. This kind of disgust would be directed on pathogens and infectious agents, that is to say, on animals that are not predators but that are nevertheless dangerous (s. particularly Kelly 2011, e.g., 51). Disgust would thus be a system for biological contamination avoidance. Such descriptions, however based on compelling data, seem to be partial when applied to the human experience of disgust. On the one side, they correctly displace disgust before and beyond human beings by making it into a mechanism that may also be found in other animals. On the other side, they limit disgust by stating that the class of dangerous things it appropriately refers to differs from that of, e.g., predators or natural events that are risky for our lives. But, in fact, it is very easy to make the disgusting and the dangerous overlap and, as is well known, there are plenty of situations in which this situation occurs (think of facing a snake or a spider). Rozin and Fallon already stigmatised such an approach in their seminal paper, by asking why "feces and other decayed substances are not treated simply as additional dangerous substances" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 33; further, s. again Nussbaum 2006, 88). In other words, the very problem of such perspectives consists in losing *our own* experience of disgust: There is a discontinuity, that these perspectives do not manage to account for, between such mechanism and what we humans experience when we feel disgust. This would be no problem at all if these studies did not come to deprive the experience of disgust of any gravity and significance in our lives. This move is very expensive inasmuch as it would prevent us from understanding disgust in a way consistent with our experience of it. Indeed, it seems to be very difficult to say anything about an emotion without presupposing the experience that one has of it. Subsequently, as Kelly (2011) tries to do, such perspectives should propose a plausible way to recompose the whole phenomenon of disgust after breaking it up into pieces. I will try to come back to this point briefly below, even though it is not the theme of my paper.

This conclusion, radical as it may sound, would be likely more acceptable if Rozin and Fallon's justification of the psychological contamination thesis did not rely on the hypothesis of a fundamental pattern of human thought, which they describe by the two laws of the "sympathetic magic": the law of *contagion* and the law of *similarity*. The first law, which they summarise as "once in contact, always in contact" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 30), states that things which once got in contact with each other continue to influence each other forever afterwards. This is typical in case of disgusting object that contact non-disgusting objects: the latter become immediately disgusting. The second law, that of *similarity*, states that if things look alike, this resemblance points to a fundamental similarity or even identity between them. Therefore, a non-disgusting object that resemble a disgusting one might be considered to be as disgusting as the latter.

This way, Rozin and Fallon explain our revulsion at the prospect of eating animals as a sort of psychological illusion grounded on one of the structures of our thought, which makes us shudder in front of animals because they resemble us human beings (law of similarity) and because we unacknowledgedly believe that, by eating them, we will take on their properties (law of contagion) up to (ideally) becoming animals ourselves. The deep causes of disgust (animal avoidance, unacknowledged belief) become effective thanks to the psychical pattern of magical thinking. While the first two causes show the path toward a universal way of becoming oneself insofar as they belong to the class of beliefs, the third cause of disgust consists in a mechanism that activates in dependence on the two former causes but independently from who one has become, by projecting an attribute ("contaminant") to objects selected through the culture one belongs to. This fundamental pattern of human thought is the factual ground for founding the adaptive justification of disgust on its capacity to provide "a powerful way to transmit culture. Endowing the rejections of certain substances with strong negative affective value helps ensure that those rejections will be internalized and thus less subject to temptation or modification" (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 33). Accordingly, disgust is a cultural emotion not only in the sense that cultures shape it but also in the sense that any culture needs disgust in order to be preserved and stored throughout generations. The emotion of disgust provides "a powerful way" to make a culture be immediately thought and felt as the sole de-

scription of what things are and how we have to relate to them and to ourselves, and this is the ultimate evolutionary meaning of disgust for the two psychologists. This highly embraceable opinion becomes highly problematic as soon as it makes reference to magical thinking.

Nowadays, this view is difficult to be held for at least one reason: the recent evidence about disgust as a disease avoidance mechanism does not root disgust in a pattern of human thought, but in a programme of human affective life that activates in the presence of contamination risks. This allows us to hypothesise that disgust underwent a deep phylogenetic transformation along with human evolution since it started as a disease avoidance mechanism, up to becoming one of the strongest affective devices for cultural transmission. However, this is not a transformation that occurred once and for all: it repeats every time within the ontogenetic development of every human being. Now, one could object that this situation is similar to that of “magical thinking”: there is a mechanism that works independently from, and comes before, the human ‘self’. Just as the pattern of human thought regulated by the laws of sympathetic magic, the disease avoidance mechanism would underlie our formation as persons. Furthermore, this hypothesis does not seem to solve the problem of the discontinuity between the disease avoidance mechanism and the wider and significantly different human experience of disgust.⁴ My answer is that, on the contrary, my hypothesis make us able to think of ‘disgust’ as a result: for each human being the “disease avoidance mechanism” *becomes* ‘disgust’ (that is, something different) because of the cultural and psychical pressures (together with biological ones) that merge with it. Put in different words, I hypothesise a sort of permeability among the different processes at work, at least in the development of the human self. This makes my hypothesis consistent with the holistic view on disgust insofar as it supports the idea that disgust integrates within one’s development. In opposition, magical thinking is a structure of thought, which remains unaltered and presupposed throughout the ontogeny of the human being and which culture simply endows with the information concerning what is disgusting and what is not.

⁴ So different that Rozin and Fallon state “although it probably has some adaptive value as protection against microbial (physical) contamination, psychological contamination seems on balance to be maladaptive in that it in most instances it motivates rejection of nutritive substances” (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 29).

As for the problem of the discontinuity between the disease avoidance mechanism and the wider and significantly different human experience of disgust, it needs scientific evidence to be really clarified. Without such evidence, there cannot be any simply conceptual understanding of this discontinuity. At least in this paper, which aims to be strictly philosophical, my task must limit itself to providing the right conceptual framework to conceive of the path from the disease avoidance mechanism to what we properly call disgust; such a path, however, can only be clarified through other instruments, first of all through experiments and the analysis of empirical data.

Another problem with Rozin and Fallon's cultural evolutionary hypothesis to justify disgust – a view which Rozin has recently defended again (Rozin and Haidt 2013) – is that it does not leave any room to the intuitive and plausible idea that with that “strong negative affective value”, which characterises our culturally loaded rejection of some things, we express disgust *reasonably*. Instead, for Rozin and Fallon, disgust is *irrational* for substantial reasons, that is to say, disgust is irrational independently from who one is and from the environment where one grew up. Contrarily, the holistic view on disgust roots this emotion in the fact that one's self was shaped within a given culture. From this perspective, disgust is not essentially irrational. It may be dealt with as rational or irrational on the basis of its appraisal by both those who feel disgust and the group where one feels such an emotion. This means that disgust can undergo a critique, and this critique can evaluate disgust before a given object as rational. As we shall see in the next section, this has consequences for the general topic of a just society.

Self- and cultural preservation, animal avoidance, sensitivity for contamination: all these aspects regulated by disgust seem to indicate at least another ground for this emotion, which has to do with our concrete existence as human beings, who conceive of and perceive ourselves in a way that merges together cultural, collective and personal instances. We are who we are only because we grew up in one culture that, mediated by our caregivers, blends with biological developmental programmes (including those pertaining disgust) and, together with our own experiences, shapes the concrete persons we are. In this story, disgust seems to have the precise function of detecting and recognising what is not appropriate to our “ideational” nature (be it true or not), i.e. what

does not ideationally belong to us (be it true or not) – in a nutshell: who we are not.

3. Disgust and the Problem of a Just Society

So far, I have tried to shift the understanding of disgust from Rozin and Fallon's irrational view to a holistic view that bestows disgust with a rational kernel, while granting to it a fundamental arbitrariness. This is no paradox nor is it a naive or deeply illogical viewpoint. Indeed, I claim that disgust expresses a stance (better, *my stance*) over both the world and the subject who perceives it (*me*). Accordingly, disgust expresses my position within the world, where 'my position' is by no means a particular standpoint on a certain theme, but describes the way I deeply (even unacknowledgedly) conceive of and perceive myself in relationship to the world where I grew up (that is, my world, or better, my cultural world). In this sense, disgust expresses who one is not, where 'is' has by no means a strictly ontological meaning but describes the way I deeply see myself. Indeed, the verb 'to be' is the only one I really have to describe myself. Either way, disgust does this in a negative and aversive way.

Now, the time has come to go back to Nussbaum's account of disgust in order to show the advantages of embracing the holistic view for a just society. In her account of disgust, Martha Nussbaum seems to deprive disgust of its gravity and significance. Yet, she delegitimizes disgust in a way that differs from Rozin and Fallon's. She accepts their idea that there is a fundamental pattern of our thought that obeys to the law of sympathetic magic, but she loosens the knot between food, animalness and disgust (Nussbaum 2006, 92). Referring to Becker (1973), she claims that disgust is triggered by items that remind us both of our animal vulnerability and of our mortality. As already shown in the first section, we do not fully reject animalness *per se*, but only its vulnerable aspect, which relates to death as well as to spoilage and decay. Subsequently, disgust is not a food-related emotion but rather expresses our rejection of our vulnerability. In this sense, we do not risk taking on the properties of disgusting objects but rather becoming more vulnerable and weaker. This, however, is an effect of magical thinking (and of the psychological sense of contamination), that is to say, it is the consequence of a projection, something that is added to the reality in front of which one reacts with disgust. Here it thus becomes possible to weaken disgust itself and

to make its (public) claims and its role in the law appear ridiculous. However, the neutralisation of disgust has its costs: first of all, as already observed, it implies considering this emotion fully unreasonable. But this is at odds with the idea that it is a deeply culturally shaped emotion, which always involves us intimately. Cultures settle in our lives and survive throughout generations insofar as they provide reasons to live. Persons too have their ideas on life and give reasons for them. It is difficult to conceive of human emotions as fully detached from the rational animals that we are: thus, we can provide reasons for our emotions too. These reasons may be more or less strong and reasonable, but they always occur within the discursive practice of a given society, by means of which one acquires most of one's cultural values and, above all, through which one can even change one's mind and try to influence one's emotional reactions. Neutralising disgust thus implies, first, distrusting people and their rational capacities and, second, not seeing its fundamental role in shaping who a person is.

A further point concerns the distinction between an actual experience of disgust and the use of disgust independently from such an experience: The disgusted person conceives of the disgusting object in a very different way from those who refer to disgust and project disgusting properties on persons and things without feeling disgust. Downgrading disgust to an unreasonable or even irrational emotion blurs the line that differentiates the second experience from the first one, while they are characterised by different reasons and affective qualities, as we have seen in the first section. In order to overcome disgust for social and justice purposes, I find it more profitable to take disgust in earnest in both situations. If disgust is the emotion that points out a problem of identity and difference between human beings and the other beings that elicit it, then both *actually felt* disgust and *simply used* disgust point out this same problem in two incomparable ways. One expresses a stance over the object of disgust, and this stance sounds like: "You are not who I am". This is evident and unproblematic with regard to most items in the world, but disgusting items dim such evidence and require that one affirms it violently: by means either of actual revulsion or of a discriminating behaviour. I claim that the reason for that is to be found neither, as for Rozin and Fallon, in the prospect of the oral incorporation of the disgusting items or the similarity of an object with disgusting ones, nor, as for Nussbaum, in any prospects of vulnerability, nor,

finally, in any magical thinking. Instead, one either feels or uses disgust whenever there is an object that *seems* to be part of one's life (be it due to resemblance or ordinariness) but is actually not. And 'actually' does not mean any realistic stance, according to which one really refers to something disgusting *per se* out there, but, as said, it means a deep cultural and personal stance. Despite their differences on both the affective and the cognitive side, both behaviours refer to disgust and make use of the entire set of properties and words pertaining to this emotion because they follow the sole rule of affirming by negation the difference between the person who is disgusted (be they actually disgusted or just referring to disgust without actually feeling it) and the disgusting object or person.

This is possible because, during one's development in a given society, one has been shaped in such a way that might no longer even contemplate seeing certain things. Later, one becomes able to reproduce this selective competence also in other contexts, which have nothing to do with the original ones. To the extent of actual disgust, I do not need to be even partially aware of such selective process, just as I do not need to be aware that my language is *mine* and other people are not barbarians (etymologically "stutterers") because they do not speak my own language. As said, disgust is part of my equipment for facing the world. I can delve into myself and my culture to find the deep reasons that lead me to feel disgust in the presence of something, but likely I won't be able to find them because they are largely arbitrary. Insects, stench, feces and the like are typical disgusting objects, that is to say they are mostly *not* arbitrary objects of disgust, insofar as they correspond to the objects of the disease avoidance mechanism. However, human beings do not experience them as disgusting because they are pathogen-givers: this is a recently acquired awareness, which has profited from the discoveries in the fields of biology and medicine and makes disgust overlap with fear. In the presence of insects, disgust mostly seems to be irrational, whereas fear may be an appropriate emotion. This fundamental irrationality of disgust is different from that attributed to it by Rozin, Fallon and Nussbaum insofar as, first, it can be the object of public dispute and reasoning and, second, it relies on the arbitrary difference that one marks as a singular person who has grown up in a given culture. This is the reason why our actual experience of disgust resembles more to crossing borders. Indeed, disgust marks a

distance from its correlative items wherever such items get proximate to us (s. Kolnai 1929, 72) in order to defend one's own integrity. And that integrity is what makes one the person one perceives oneself to be. In this sense, disgust has been correctly defined a defensive emotion.

As for the use of disgust, I am much more able to account for my use of it and a careful analysis can easily lead me to acknowledge that the reasons for my alleged disgust are racial hatred, compensative self-affirmation, etc. In these situations, disgust is more of a means to hurt and discriminate, therefore to attack somebody, rather than a way to defend oneself by chasing the disgusting object away. This form of disgust is by no means the *emotion* of disgust: it is a behaviour that follows the rules of disgust but that is rooted in different experiences and emotions. Actual disgust makes us feel like who or what we are not. Making use of disgust does serve to distinguish us from who or what we are not (it builds a border). Actual disgust exhibits so a strong relationship between humans and what they are not that humans react with a violent rejection: revulsion. Thus, when someone makes use of disgust without feeling it, she is referring to this strong and rejected relationship between her and the object of disgust.

This does not mean that one cannot feel genuine disgust in the presence of someone or a group of people, nor that one would be justified for this in some sense. In this perspective, disgust never hides from humanity, but always unveils our concrete humanity. Still, the real advantage of a holistic view on disgust consists in the fact that disgust can always be a matter of discussion and reason-giving practices, of assessment and appraisal, and, finally, it urges us to account for our disgust, that is to say, for our stances on the world, a world where we feel the disgusting item should not have any citizenship at all. On the contrary, Nussbaum's view makes disgust a non-disputable emotion insofar as it relies on a thought pattern that is substantially irrational. This assumption poses difficulties to her great endeavour to show how our mind has changed with regard to disgusting objects and practices. Consider the gay-rights movements. Indeed, the Western mind has changed throughout the last few decades because our prejudices have been challenged by homosexuals. This was only possible because disgust is a plastic emotion, which speaks of we are in relationship to our world within a given culture. That is,

disgust is in principle a reasonable emotion. So far I have tried to contend exactly this point.

This way, it becomes not only possible but also necessary to put under criticism the emotion of disgust and its use in public as well as legal context. Thus, its role in law-making or appraising a given behaviour as illegal appears reasonable, once again insofar as it reveals our stance over the world (more starkly, it reveals who we are). Also, it appears even profitable because this appearance favours those discursive practices that allow us both to become more aware of how we perceive ourselves and what our deep attitudes are, and to try and shape them as well as our society in the way we believe to be the best and most just.

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