

Reply to Alberto Siani

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By Serena Feloj

First of all, I wish to thank Alberto Siani for his generous discussion of my book and his stimulating remarks. His commentary gives me the chance to spell out some theoretical elements accounting for the background of my book on disgust.

My theoretical take on disgust emerges, in accordance with my methodological premises, from a historical reconstruction of the debate revolving around the topic of disgust and of the ensuing philosophical tools devoted to its understanding. I am especially interested in the idea, familiar to Kantian scholars, that the main task of philosophy is to challenge common sense by means of unusual sounding questions. This can be conspicuously applied to disgust. Usually understood as a very common reaction, which is typical of our everyday life, the family of words revolving around disgust is often abused by language, especially when expressed in English. It is then quite easy to fall into a simplistic reading of disgust in the field of aesthetics. Generally taken as an outright negative category, artists, critics and also philosophers apply it more and more often to the interpretation of works in contemporary art. Clear examples are provided in this respect by the Viennese Actionism's very controversial performances, but many other cases could be mentioned here.

By contrast, Mendelssohn's and Kant's theories prompt us to take disgust cautiously, starting from its very definition. It is in fact not entirely obvious what meaning should be given to disgust. On the one hand, one can confidently claim that disgust is a totally negative reaction: disgust is the most pure form of displeasure that causes an immediate rejection of the object. Disgust is *prima facie* simple and its essential features can be limited to three: (1) it is a categorical refusal of the object as unassimilable otherness; (2) it is always taken as a real experience; (3) it is immediate and unavoidable.

On the other hand, disgust can be triggered by very different objects and situations: one can feel disgust towards an insect, towards an action, such as eating something unusual, but also towards a moral behaviour, such as

discriminating other people or taking advantage of someone weaker. Furthermore, the nature of disgust is ambivalent: it comes about in the form of a physiological reaction, but it has a deeply cultural basis. It should also be acknowledged that even speaking about aesthetic disgust is controversial. Some interpreters contend that disgust is a merely aesthetic sensation, while some others state that there is no way of having an aesthetic representation of disgust. These are some of the many issues that a philosophical definition of disgust forces us to consider. I believe therefore that before discussing any concrete application of disgust, it is necessary to make it clear what are my theoretical premises, also keeping in mind that this definition of disgust is not necessarily uniformly shared by others.

In brief, I personally would argue that (1) we have to distinguish between a physiological disgust, towards objects, and a moral disgust, towards actions; (2) we then have to differentiate disgust as a subjective reaction from the phenomenology of disgusting objects or actions; we have also to take the definition of the feeling of disgust separately from its particular applications; (3) we finally have to assess whether an authentic aesthetic disgust is possible.

Through a discussion of these three points, some main claims can also be isolated. First, I should say that I am mostly interested in the moral dimension of disgust, as I think that a philosophical inquiry into this kind of disgust could be particularly interesting and maybe also useful in our day and age. Second, I am particularly interested in a definition of disgust, more than in its multiple applications, as I share the position of those who think that disgust (as many other emotions) is 'normative neutral'. This amounts to saying that moral disgust is not normatively directed against certain behaviours, but it can be used as a powerful emotional tool to reinforce one's own moral judgement towards an action. In this respect, Martha Nussbaum's (2010) interpretation of disgust as a conservative emotion can be accepted only after making it clear that disgust does not provide new moral contents, but is only the expression of a previously set moral system. It is instead difficult to share Nussbaum's position when she claims that disgust is a non-liberal emotion, typical of homophobic, racist or classist behaviours. It is my belief, instead, that it can certainly be used to express racist convictions, but it can also be used against them. It all depends on our moral system.

What is certain, regardless of how we use the term disgust and towards what, is that disgust is always the opposite of indifference. Whereas taste has been traditionally taken as a tool for inclusion and a relevant instrument for social development, disgust marks an exclusion. It is a clear demarcation sign of what is morally bad and what is morally good. In this respect, disgust surely feeds

conflicts and keeps out what cannot (or should not) be accepted. But differently from hate, which demands the elimination of the hated object, and also differently from offence, which is an active act against someone else, disgust is an unavoidable and immediate reaction that commands to refuse an object or an action as intolerable. From such a definition of disgust questions ensue about the theoretical consistency of the concept of aesthetic disgust. Granted that, as traditionally claimed, disgust is always directed towards real objects, it is difficult to admit that a work of art can cause an authentic reaction of disgust. This does not amount to saying, of course, that art cannot deal with a reflection on disgust. It rather means that the aesthetic representation, in this respect, shows its limits. Many would indeed agree that art, even if it can certainly represent disgusting objects, is not able to trigger an authentic feeling of disgust as absolute displeasure. As little as it may be, some kind of pleasure is always implicit in art. Otherwise, as Siani has aptly pointed out, the distinction between fiction and reality would collapse. This is not only a variation on Mendelssohn and Kant's theories on disgust, but also the idea put forward by Jean Clair (2004), an art critic who has recently spoken about disgust in art as a domestication, that is to say a nullification, of authentic feeling.

But if art is unable to generate an authentic aesthetic disgust, by contrast one can nevertheless claim that moral disgust, in the form of repugnance at bad behaviour, can be represented in art, through the object of the representation, or also, sometimes, through the very performance of the artist. In this sense, art can clearly play a role in moral education by stimulating an emotional reaction to bad actions. Disgust can thus become a moral instrument in the form of a negative motive. We can also define disgust, as Aurel Kolnai (1929) does, as an ethical-cognitive emotion. I assume therefore that the aesthetic representation, whose limits are revealed by its inability to, strictly speaking, trigger disgust, and the moral representation, which instead finds in disgust a useful instrument, should be carefully distinguished. The moral meaning and the moral function of the aesthetic experience of art can thereby be explored in their own right. According to this perspective, art can be seen as playing a role in the process of education and of civilisation without attaching to it an explicit normative content.

The Emotion of Disgust in Art

Jean Clair's brief essay on disgust provides an original interpretation of contemporary art, which combines his thorough knowledge as an art critic, a strong reference to Freud's psychoanalysis, and many notions stemming from eighteenth century aesthetics. As is well known, Freud has dedicated many pages to the notion of disgust and its development, introducing, as one of the most innovative elements in his theory, the idea that disgust is characterised by a complex ambivalence. While being an emotion of clear refusal, it also implies a

hidden and secret attraction to the refused object. In the same year in which Kolnai published his treatise on disgust, Freud dealt with this emotion in his *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, by stating, as Kolnai does, the impossibility to pass over disgust when felt. Freud points to the emotion of disgust as a constitutive feature of our civilisation. It may appear as natural, but on the contrary it has an exquisitely cultural essence. The cultural nature of disgust does not guarantee its overcoming, as exactly the opposite is true. Overcoming disgust would mean, in this respect, overcoming the very barriers shaped by civilization processes. It would mean the impossible way out of one's own culture.

Jean Clair also refers to Freud's notion of taboo, as he claims that what is perceived as disgusting is actually something we have removed. Furthermore, he refers to the idea that art is the most elevated representation of our 'social Super-Ego'. While art has had the role of channeling our impulses and erotic instincts, society seems now to have made that collective Super-Ego collapse. In the emotion of disgust contemporary art often searches a way out, notably achieved by means of some kind of otherness. Works of art with body parts, organic secretions and even dead bodies confront aesthetics with the same remark already formulated by Friedrich Schlegel: the more taste gets used to stimuli, the more it requires increasingly strong stimulations and even violent incitements (Schlegel 1958:254). The contemporary artistic quest for newer and stronger stimulations indulging in disgusting objects is however possible only because exactly these objects remain taboo, because the barriers of disgust built by civilisation are still stable. In a Freudian perspective, as art expresses the need to overcome a taboo, at the same time it also establishes the existence of the taboo itself. This is precisely what happens, according to Jean Clair as well as according to my own interpretation, in contemporary art. In what follows I shall try to discuss, in response to Siani's input, whether or not one could say the same for religious satire.

While acknowledging the disgusting as one of the main categories of contemporary art, we can also read it as something that leads us back to our animal state. However, as Jean Clair writes, the human being does not tolerate a decomposition of form, the birth of a radical formlessness: we always need a form. In this sense Clair interprets disgust in contemporary art as the formless put into a form. It seems that now art has the function of reminding us of the process civilisation has rejected through disgust: the primary and primitive functions of our body. But it is just an illusion, an attempted trick even, that the taboo of disgust can be really overcome and removed. In this sense, the work of art remains, as Freud defines it, a light hypnosis, which allows us a reconciliation with the external world. Jean Clair's fascinating analysis ends with maybe too

blunt a statement: no one nowadays deals with the complex relationship between aesthetics and ethics, but the increasing recurrence of the disgusting object in contemporary art requires us to take seriously this difficult relation.

Satire as Mocking of Taboos

After this theoretical introduction, I can now discuss the case Alberto Siani has depicted. Can the notion of disgust help us frame the reaction against Charlie Hebdo's cartoons? On the one hand, as I do not have competences in Islamic studies, nor in sociology or in political philosophy, it is not easy for me to believe I can provide a clear answer; my knowledge of the dramatic terror attack of 2015 only comes from reading newspaper reports about it. On the other hand, I generally have a cautious attitude towards the application of philosophical theory to particular and concrete cases, as it usually means to bend the complexity of concrete experience to theoretical considerations. In this sense, I think that the reaction against Charlie Hebdo should be read at different levels, including possibly, among others, on an aesthetic level.

An aesthetic reading is paradoxically possible, though, only if we refer to the notion of moral disgust (and not to 'aesthetic disgust'). As I have shown, disgust is excluded from aesthetic appreciation and cannot be fully represented. In this way we cannot claim that the cartoons are an example of satire *and* a case of aesthetic disgust; in brief, if we take them as satire they are not disgusting, and if we are disgusted by them we are not recognising them as satire. In this sense, Siani is right when he writes that this would be a case of a collapse of the difference between fiction and reality.

The question then is not whether the cartoons are able to represent disgust, but whether the reaction against them can be discussed as an instance of disgust. First of all, I think that we have to distinguish disgust from other negative emotions. Disgust comes indeed to the fore as a well-defined emotion not only when we take it as a negative concept, but especially when we compare it to other negative emotions. If we consider the three elements I have listed above as essential for a definition of disgust ([1] a categorical refusal, [2] towards real objects [3] as immediate and unavoidable reaction), it becomes clear that we cannot equate disgust and offence. The first step is then to clarify that disgust and offence are not the same emotion. This of course does not exclude that the same reaction against cartoons can be taken both as complex and as the combination of different emotions, among which disgust and offence can coexist.

In this respect, Siani's questions "Are there images or forms of expression in the first place that we find offensive independently of our moral judgement because they offend our taste, say?" or "Are aesthetically offensive images ugly, tasteless, disgusting or, if not, what are they?" are in a certain sense excluded from my argumentation. I would rather discuss two other passages in Siani's reflection. First of all, we can indeed read the reaction against Charlie Hebdo as a disgusted one, following in Martha Nussbaum's steps as she describes the case of homophobia in *From Disgust to Humanity* (2010). It is easy to imagine that the Islamic terrorists had a disgusted reaction. This of course does not mean that those who are disgusted are also allowed to destroy the disgusting object. The unassimilable otherness requires nor justifies any act against it.

This is however only one aspect of the issue. We can also dwell on a more general discussion on religious satire as artistic expression mocking religion icons or practices. Religious satire can be interpreted as a work of art that, as it often happens, confronts itself with taboos. And, as we have seen, disgust can be taken, in a Freudian perspective, as a defensive reaction against a violation of taboos. Siani's proposal is to interpret religious satire in the light of two aspects of disgust: disgust as a violent reaction against what is unassimilable and disgust as saturation of an excessive sweetness. This duplicity of disgust can surely be applied to give formal limits to satire: as any work of art, satire works successfully when it is not too unpleasant and when it is not too soft and meaningless. But this only tells us that satire can be assessed, like other works of art, in relation to 'tamed' disgust. In this sense, as previously argued, the necessary pleasant component of art prevents the representation from triggering disgust in full. One might further discuss, then, whether art has really the power of making pleasant what can be unpleasant in reality, in other words whether art can domesticate what is disgusting. The collapse of fiction and reality or the ability to create an aesthetic illusion should in particular be read at this level.

A different problem appears instead when we stop handling religious satire in reference to its artistic form, and only focus on its content, that is, as act in itself, something that can only be considered real. Could the act of mocking a religious taboo be treated as a form of blasphemy? Is blasphemy an example of moral disgust? I think we can answer both questions in the affirmative, of course always keeping in mind that disgust is not a reflective reaction, but merely an immediate one, and that at the same time it is deeply cultural and relative to subjective sensibilities. Here the problem is not what art is able to do, the problem is rather the act of mocking religion. And of course it is possible that some people find this act morally disgusting. Similarly, in the same culture or in another, every limitation of the freedom of speech could be regarded as

disgusting. This is what I mean when I claim that disgust is normative neutral: it is only an empty instrument that can be used by a normative system according to the moral law.

In this sense I think that disgust is closely connected to education and I totally agree with Siani when he claims “that education should lead to the subject’s ability to experience disgust, so it should be an education *to* disgust”. Pace Nussbaum, I do not think that disgust is in itself non-liberal; disgust is instead an emotion-based way to give our morality some instruments against indifference. Through an education to disgust, we are able to set boundaries to our moral system and we are emotionally equipped to reject what is unassimilable in our reference system. Disgust can thus involve art in an essential dynamic: on the one hand, disgust has the non-normative ability to delimit artistic representation, on the other hand it allows one to show the educational possibilities of art as experience against indifference and as a vehicle of culture and moral values. After all, what I think is still interesting in the classical theory of disgust is the ability of this simple defensive reaction to set limits: no matter whether they are representative and aesthetic limits or whether they are moral limits, disgust give us the power of not being indifferent towards what is irremediably unassimilable.

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