



Multiculturalism Bites

Martha Nussbaum on Disgust

David Edmonds:

Chances are you find the idea of cannibalism disgusting. Likewise, eating slugs. The concept of disgust may not at first seem to have anything to do with multiculturalism. But often members of one culture feel disgust at the values or practices of members of another. This could be as basic as repugnance of another culture's food: its diet, cooking, or method of animal slaughter. Some people feel a sense of disgust when they see women from a different culture covering their face with a veil: those from a more conservative culture might on the contrary be disgusted by the sight of women exposing their legs, or by homosexuality. Parents might fear that their offspring will be somehow 'contaminated' by the values and practices of a culture of which they disapprove. How seriously should we take this sense of disgust? Should we rely on it as a foundation for law? Martha Nussbaum is an internationally acclaimed philosopher, who's based at the University of Chicago.

Nigel Warburton:

Martha Nussbaum, we're going to talk about disgust. That's not obviously a political topic or a philosophical topic. Could you say a little bit about what you mean by disgust and what part could it possibly play in politics?

Martha Nussbaum:

OK, sure Nigel. I think we usually think that disgust is a completely visceral reaction where we just want to throw up. But actually there's some wonderful news, some psychological research on disgust that shows that it really does have a cognitive content: that what people think they're smelling, tasting, touching makes a big difference as to whether they're disgusted or not. People are given this very same smell, in one case they're told it's cheese, in the other case they're told it's human faeces. And of course, in the first case they're not likely to experience disgust, and in the second case they do. So it's connected with our ideas. The general conclusion of this line of research is that disgust is a reaction to the prospect of contamination by something that's connected with our anxiety about our animality, our bodily, decaying nature. So the primary objects of disgust are human waste products and then of course the corpse. That's bad enough because a lot of irrationality can go into that, things that are not really dangerous are found disgusting, and things that are dangerous are often not found so disgusting. But, it doesn't do a lot of social harm.

NW:

You've written that disgust is a dangerous social sentiment, what did you mean by that?

MN:

The harm comes when – and this happens in every single society – people project that disgust reaction on to some group of people. It seems to be a way that people have of cordoning themselves off yet further from the base parts of their own animality to create a subgroup to whom they impute these properties: sliminess, ooze, bad smell, and they treat those people as people we really can't have contact with. So the idea of untouchability in the Indian caste system is a very obvious instance of that certain people, and they were the people who dealt with waste products and corpses, are thought to be contaminated. So you can't eat food served by such a person, you can't have bodily contact with such a person.

I'm afraid that this is very widespread. American racism in the south was propelled by very similar views so that people thought that they could not eat at the same lunch counter with an African-American, they found that prospect disgusting. They could not swim in the same swimming pool, they would not drink from the same drinking fountain. My father who was a very educated lawyer, partner in a Philadelphia law firm, came from the Deep South and he actually believed if an African-American person had a drink of water from a particular drinking

glass, you could not use that glass afterwards: it was contaminated. This kind of magical thinking is characteristic of what I call 'projective disgust'.

NW:

It sounds from what you said is that if you think that this projective disgust has its origins in quite sound evolutionary development, that there are things which we need to avoid as animals, and we have these instinctive reactions to some of those. But that's been generalised to things which it's completely irrational to feel that way towards.

MN:

Yes, that seems to be what happens. Now even the evolutionary kind of disgust, the problem is that it doesn't really track the sense of danger. There are lots of dangerous things, let's say poisonous mushrooms, that we don't find disgusting and that's why so many people die from eating them. On the other hand there are things that we *do* find disgusting that are not at all dangerous. For example, these experiments, they often sterilize a cockroach and then they ask people if they'll eat it. Of course the people know that they'll come to no harm, and yet I bet you wouldn't eat it, and no one does. In fact even when they sealed the cockroach in an indigestible plastic capsule, even then they wouldn't eat it.

That's not every harmful, but somehow people extend it to a group or groups. Of course, a lot of discrimination against women over many societies has been fuelled by this idea that women's bodies are sort of disgusting because they have all these fluids coming out of them, they're connected with birth. So, men often feel in many, many parts of the world that women even though desirable are also at the same time disgusting. Jews in medieval Europe and some parts of modern Europe were found slimy, disgusting, and in Nazi books for children they were represented as disgusting slugs, beetles, other disgusting animals. So it's a very ubiquitous part of social life.

And I think in modern America today the main group that's found disgusting are gays and lesbians, and I would say particularly gay men. The propaganda that's spread against them by right-winged groups always involves the idea that they're really all about faeces and blood: they try to scare people and to animate this kind of disgust reaction by the way they portray the sex lives of gay men.

NW:

That's really interesting because it betrays both a very heightened imagination - because they haven't witnessed these events - but also a sort of warped sense of what homosexuals might do in private. It's a very strange phenomenon that this should actually be allowed to enter any kind of political debate.

MN:

Yes, that's very well put. There's a prurience about it, an obsession with imagining this, but then a complete refusal to imagine these people as human beings pursuing human purposes. They're treated as the monsters that are utterly different, and this is all the more remarkable because a lot of the former sodomy laws in the US were actually neutral about the sex of the partners, and so they ruled out certain acts. And in one of the law cases that was most famous in modern times, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the plaintiffs actually introduced a heterosexual couple who said that the law also inhibits our practices because we can't have oral and anal sex under this law. But interestingly the Attorney General's Office in Georgia held that they had to be thrown out of the suit because they didn't have standing to challenge the law because in fact they were not at risk of being arrested. So it was understood that even though the law was worded neutrally, it was targeted at the practices of gays and lesbians.

NW:

It's interesting as well because the disgust is disgust at something which isn't present, and that's quite different from the disgust that you might have in the presence of putrid food or something like this.

MN:

Yes, I think that's a very important distinction. John Stuart Mill called it a purely constructive

reaction. Now I think that it's fine to have laws that regulate the unwilling exposure that people have to genuinely disgusting smells and substances. So for example, if your neighbour decides to run an open sewer on his property and the smell comes over to your property, you have a cause of action under nuisance law. But that's because it's an actual physical substance and it's hitting you unwillingly.

Now in the case of sex between two people in private, there's nothing about their physical act that impinges on your physical reality: it's only your imagination that's involved. They're doing a consensual act, they're not really trying to subject you to it.

NW:

Would this extend though to say a really powerful cooking smell, somebody is cooking a strong curry, do you think you should have a right to complain about the smell of people of a different culture cooking next door to you?

MN:

Well this is a very interesting question because it's often bound up, as you suggested, with cultural prejudice. I think it is a tricky question because I myself as a defender of animal rights do experience some degree of disgust as meat smells. But I guess I think until our society reaches a point where the pain inflicted upon animals is illegal under law, then at that point we could start to deal with this. I guess I think I don't have a right to impose my views on other people by bringing them to court for their cooking meat next door.

Now in the cases you described, now I think it's very common, I mean in India for example, people will often try to zone out Muslims by saying, 'Oh, the smell of beef offends me.' One group is probably really disgusted by the practices of another. But it's through an imaginary transfer where the beef becomes disgusting because of a kind of generalised disgust toward Muslims, and then you just transfer it onto that smell. I mean in reality the smell of beef and the smell of lamb are not very different. So why is it that they can't stand to have beef? It's really because of what they think. They think these are Muslims engaging in godless practices. So I don't think that at the end of the day we should allow legal actions in those cases, although they move closer to something we might at least consider.

NW:

Does that mean that you want to rule out disgust as relevant to our moral and legal decision making?

MN:

Well, there are of course some people in the history of the law (Lord Devlin was the most famous such person, but actually my own University of Chicago colleague Leon Cass, who was head of the President's Commission on Bioethics, also had a similar view) who think that the disgust of an average member of society is all by itself sufficient reason to make a harmless practice illegal.

Now, that's the position I'm opposed to. I don't think though that that means that disgust has absolutely no role in law-making because I do think disgust at primary objects that is sewage, human excrement, corpses and so on, can be legitimately be a source of regulation and of nuisance law. But we better make sure that it really is a nuisance of the kind that I'm talking about. That is sometimes people close down sex clubs saying that it's a health nuisance – well, actually, it's not a nuisance in the sense I'm talking about because there's nothing more likely to spread HIV than ignorance, and in the sex club they're less ignorant than the average member of society. And furthermore, they usually have signs advertising condom use and so on. So what is it that people think when they think that's a health nuisance? I think they're disgusted when they think of the sex acts that are committed, and it of course doesn't impinge on their senses in any direct way. So it is another case of purely constructive disgust.

NW:

You mentioned that disgust towards women and women's bodies is very prevalent in the history of the world. One area in terms of dress that some people find disgusting is when women expose their legs say in miniskirts, some cultures find that absolutely beyond the pale.

Does that mean that we should just ignore those feelings that those people feel, that sense that somehow there's a religious affront or that women are immoral because they're sexually provocative or showing parts of their body that should not be displayed?

MN:

I think the most difficult area of this whole subject is the area of what I call direct offence. That is where somebody is in your face inflicting something on you, but it's not a primary object of disgust: it's not a lonesome smell, or some dangerous germs or something, it's just something that you deeply dislike. Now in general, I think we shouldn't allow the law to be dragged into the service of people's prejudices. But what should the limits be?

What about public nudity? Now I guess I think it's hard to defend laws that ban public nudity. I think certainly if the nudity is in a club where you have to consent to the nudity to enter the club, then I think the law has no business interfering at all. But what about nudity on a public beach, or a public bus? Well, it's not a very sound argument to say that it should be banned just because so many people find it offensive. But I guess I think so long as opportunities for nude bathing would be provided somewhere in that society, it's not a particularly harmful thing to regulate that.

Public masturbation similarly: now I can't say that I think that's a very good idea. I don't want people to be subjected to that. Now one could say children are subjected to that and so children are different and therefore that's the way we justify laws against it. But I think even if children weren't involved probably it's okay to make that illegal. But once again, we should try to think about the people: I mean if it's a homeless person who has no private dwelling place, then the law should not be harsh with that person. So we shouldn't stigmatize persons because they engage in behaviour when they may actually have no choice.

NW:

Martha Nussbaum, thank you very much.

MN:

Thank you very much Nigel.