

Motherhood and the Workings of Disgust

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Let's face it: babies and small children are disgusting. They ooze from every orifice, and these various oozings often blend with each other and with other substances to form a stinky, gooey, slimy stew. When I pick my child up from day care, his face is often encrusted with a blend of sand, saliva, and snot. A suboptimal diaper installation results in a trail of poopy footprints that can be traced back up the shoe, sock and leg directly to the source. The morning after an undetected overnight vomiting episode, the toddler, quite unperturbed, is covered from head to foot. The only thing that annoys him about the whole affair is the bath that restores him to a presentable state.¹

The fact that they themselves are not disgusted by anything is part of what makes small children disgusting. Last summer in the backyard my son joyously harvested pears

¹ In the prologue to his book *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller notes that “the very mention of some subjects, necessary subjects if we are to face up to the substance and structures of the disgusting, prompts either disgust itself or low comedy.... I have tried,” he continues, “to maintain decorum without also becoming boring or silly, erring I think on the prissy side” (1997, ix). I am perhaps less concerned for decorum than Miller, and certainly less inclined to prissiness; but I have tried, at least, to avoid gratuitously inducing disgust in the reader.

in various stages of decay, typically made available by snacking squirrels who would take a few nibbles and then toss them to the ground. My son would invariably go for the spot the squirrel had bitten, because otherwise his new teeth had trouble breaking the pear's skin. Once he found a pear that met his approval, he would carry it with him, snacking periodically, the whole day. He was not yet walking, so the pear, well seasoned with dirt, was an accessory to his crawling.

And yet, and yet: have I ever felt disgusted by my child? I have sometimes noticed things about him that others might find disgusting. But even after prewashing hundreds (thousands? Let's not do the computation) of cloth diapers in the toilet over a period of many months, even after stripping a bed full of last night's half-digested dinner and wiping down the crib rails and walls, even after countless kisses marinated in sand and snot, I see my child as essentially, radiantly pure.

Imagining any of these situations before his birth, I would have expected disgust to figure saliently in my reaction. And even now, I feel disgust on encountering any snot- or vomit-encrusted child other than my own. For me, at least, part of maternal love is that it neutralizes my sense of contamination or pollution in relation to him; or, perhaps, it causes me to see my child himself as neutralizing contaminants or pollutants: my sense of him as radiantly pure, to repeat an expression I used above, is an almost literal sense that he radiates purity.

In this essay, I will explore the workings of disgust, considering two interrelated ways in which it functions in motherhood. First, motherhood demands an evolution in a mother's sense of disgust: this evolution serves both to make the experience of mothering tolerable and to promote intimacy and important forms of knowledge. This process of

evolution reveals disgust to be a situated response that can shift in a way that is appropriately responsive to the elements of a new context.

Second, motherhood makes very salient the way in which people use responses of disgust to enforce, and to justify the enforcement of, social norms. If I take my child directly from an afternoon of outdoor play at day care to the grocery store without changing his clothes, I am subject to the raised eyebrows or downright dirty looks of other shoppers. It appears that mothers are differentially subjected to such treatment: fathers are less likely to be targeted by others' expressions of disgust.

These two aspects of the functioning of disgust are interrelated. Just as the mother experiences an appropriate relaxation of her sense of disgust which allows her to nurture her child while accepting the child's healthy, natural behaviors and bodily functions, the disgust of others serves to ratchet up social expectations and enforcement of norms regarding the "good" mother. If the mother acquiesces, she must be continually engaged in monitoring and tidying her child, which may interfere with the child's exploration of the world (while also sending the message that the child is not acceptable as he or she is). If she does not, she is subject to ongoing signs, implicit and explicit, that she is flawed or failing as a mother. The workings of disgust are, thus, a mechanism through which the oppression of women is maintained.

Before continuing, I should acknowledge that my personal experiences, which played a central role in generating these reflections, are limited: my only child is scarcely two years old as I write; no doubt there would be more and different things to say about this topic if he were older. Also, I am only one person, and I strongly suspect that the temperaments of both mother and child shape the way in which these phenomena are

realized in a particular relationship. I will explore this issue further below. Finally, as an anonymous reviewer of this volume has mentioned, the social regulating function of disgust and distaste likely plays an even stronger role for mothers of children with disabilities, with these mothers experiencing greater stress as a result.

I should also say something about how I understand the notion of motherhood. In this essay, I will treat ‘mother’ as referring to a parent, whether biological or adoptive, who identifies as a woman. Some of my discussion relates to the act of breastfeeding, and thus will be relevant only to the situation of mothers who are biologically female (and primarily, though not exclusively, to those who are the biological mothers of the infants they are nursing).² Much of the discussion, however, pertains to the way in which mothers differentially internalize and are subjected to societal disgust responses, and this applies to all mothers.³

Intimacy and Knowledge

One consequence of the suspension of disgust is straightforwardly positive: it allows me to embrace my child without reluctance or hesitation under virtually any circumstances.

² I should note that breastfeeding, though it exposes one to societal disgust responses, is a privilege in our society, where many mothers work very long hours in conditions that do not enable them to pump and store breast milk for their infants’ consumption.

³ There are undoubtedly many individual differences in how the phenomena of disgust impinge on the experiences of mothers. It also may be that there are systematic differences between the experience of mothers who are biologically female and that of transgender mothers, but I am not aware of any research addressing this matter.

My delight in him and his antics is unmitigated, and I am able to participate in his delight at exploring the world and ingest, sometimes literally, the bits of it he offers up to me.

My openness surprises even me: did I really just eat that piece of food – which had already been in my baby’s mouth and on the floor, perhaps not in that order – out of my baby’s gooey fingers, because he offered it to me with such glee? Yes, I did.

In addition to the fact that it promotes intimacy between us, the relaxation of my disgust response enables me to allow my child to explore his world in ways that come naturally to him, especially orally. It greatly reduces the extent to which I feel moved to regulate his behavior, to hold him back, to engage in wincing hypervigilance.

My suspension of disgust comes with costs to me. I am almost certainly exposed to more illnesses than I would be if I were squeamish about my child’s bodily extrusions. But this cost seems worth the intimacy of my connection to him. Moreover, I suspect that my tendency to suffer from his illnesses promotes his well-being: by feeling the same symptoms he is feeling, when he is too young to be able to verbalize their nature, I am better able to empathize with his distress and to assess whether treatment is needed.

I think it is true in other instances, too, that the suspension of disgust promotes not just emotional intimacy but knowledge.⁴ Our household’s cloth diapering practices involved a daily ritual of prewashing the diapers; and this was a way in which, late at night after my child had gone to sleep, I had a genuine, physical connection to him. I was

⁴ As Sheila Lintott has reminded me, Mary Kelly’s artwork *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) explores a similar phenomenon. Kelly regarded the 139 parts of the work, including dirty diapers with feeding charts, as offering an “archaeology of everyday life” (Kelly 1996, 859).

literally in touch with what was going on in his body. I knew what he had eaten at daycare; and I could read sickness from the smell and texture of his shit. Disgust is a barrier, and the breaking down of this barrier is both constitutive and symptomatic of an enmeshed relationship between mother and child. If this is right, it makes sense to expect that as my child grows up, and the level of enmeshment that is appropriate diminishes, my disgust response will rebound to some extent. Indeed, that already seems to be happening to a limited extent: I no longer dump the remains of his breakfast cereal into my own bowl, and I wipe his mouth and make sure he has swallowed his food before I let him drink from my glass.

One might think that this diminished disgust has to do with the incorporation of the infant into the self, or with seeing the infant as part of the self.⁵ However, this description doesn't capture my experience. It doesn't disgust me when my child eats a pear that has been dragged on the ground all day, but when I think of eating it, I am disgusted. He thus has not been assimilated to me. This is why I described him, above, as radiating purity: he does not seem susceptible to contamination by the things that I would regard as potentially contaminating to me. I have wondered if this is a failure of empathy on my part: if I am disgusted by the thought of eating something, shouldn't the thought if my child's eating it disgust me just as much, if not more? But there are other

⁵ Rozin et al. hold this view about the suspension of disgust in love, suggesting that it involves "treating the other as self" (2008, 770). To my mind, this is hyperbolic: to allow the bodily substances of another to breach the boundaries of the self is not to treat the other as self. The fact that the other remains other, even as the boundaries are crossed, is a substantial part of the appeal of sex with other people (and, especially, new partners).

things that seem, quite legitimately, to escape this emotional logic: baby food and breast milk, for instance. The thought of consuming my own breast milk disgusts me, and I am not alone in this;⁶ but at the same time, for months I saw it as the healthiest of foods for my child.

Disgust, Cognition and Temperament

William Ian Miller describes the suspension of disgust in parenting as a form of effortful self-overcoming (1997, 134-136). This has not been my experience. I have never had to actively suppress or force myself to ignore or overcome a disgust response, except in rare instances of illness, where the stimulus – say, vomit full of half-digested food – was unusual (especially in its olfactory properties) and demanded special attentiveness and response due to the possibility that it indicated serious illness. Miller briefly notes that the role of disgust in mothering has traditionally been quite different from that in fathering: the mother has been expected to do the dirty work from which the father is protected (1997, 134). Perhaps it was the awareness that he was occupying a role to whose disgusting aspects he would, as a man, traditionally have been immune that made Miller's own experience of disgust in response to his child's bodily substances more acute.

⁶ Nussbaum (2004, 360) recalls the example of Elizabeth McGarry, who was required by airport security in 2002 to drink from the bottles of breast milk she was carrying.

McGarry described the experience as “embarrassing and disgusting.”

I assume there are a number of individual differences in cognition and temperament that play a role in the suspension of disgust.⁷ I'm sure some readers, both parents and non-parents, cringed at my description of allowing my child to eat pears chewed on and hurled to the ground by the neighborhood squirrels. The suspension of my disgust in this instance is facilitated by specific beliefs: I believe that exposure to a wide variety of microorganisms, especially those found in dirt, promotes successful immune system development;⁸ that holding and manipulating objects in the mouth promotes the young child's understanding of the physical world;⁹ and that, where circumstances permit, it is best for a child to be able to explore the world openly, without constant admonitions and prohibitions. Were it not for these beliefs, perhaps my disgust response would have remained intact.

Temperament is also very important, I expect. I have never been particularly squeamish; in fact, in some ways I am turned on by things at the boundary of the disgusting. When I discovered Lechevalier Mailloux, an exquisite raw-milk cheese made in Quebec, I was well aware that its attraction for me had something to do with its olfactory proximity to shit.¹⁰ Perhaps my ability to suspend disgust is related to my

⁷ For a discussion of personality and other correlates of disgust, see Haidt et al. 1994.

⁸ See, e.g., Weinstock and Elliott 2009 and McDade et al. 2010.

⁹ See, e.g., Rochat 1989 and Ruff et al. 1992.

¹⁰ Korsmeyer notes that the haute cuisine often capitalizes on “the moldability of pleasure out of disgust”: “When disgust or revulsion is confronted and overcome, what was at first disgusting can become delicious.” (2002, 219) This is distinct from the phenomenon, described by Angyal, whereby an odor that was thought to be disgusting when it was

ability, in the case of the cheese, to harness the energy of disgust as constitutive of a form of pleasure. It doesn't seem to be the same phenomenon, though.¹¹ When I enjoy snotty kisses or eat a bite of food soggy from my child's mouth, my pleasure does not seem to depend on or be enhanced by a transfigured disgust response; it seems, instead, to be a different sort of pleasure for which disgust, had it not been (largely) suspended, would have served as an obstacle. That is, my pleasure is in a loving encounter with my child, and it is not enhanced by the snottiness of the kiss or the soggianness of the food (in contrast to the case of the cheese, where it is precisely the fecal odor as such that contributes to my exquisite experience).

Another relevant aspect of my temperament is intertwined with cognition: I am not particularly risk averse. I don't believe I can protect my child from everything, and I tend to think the attempt to protect children from too much carries a variety of risks of its own. Risk management is surely a fundamental element of disgust. Disgust primes us to avoid things that pose a potential threat.¹² Beliefs about what is risky and a general temperamental orientation regarding risk, then, may be expected to shape disgust responses. It has to be said, though, that there are many things I find disgusting, from my

interpreted as signifying decay is seen as pleasant once it is recognized as the smell of glue. (1941, 394-5)

¹¹ Miller agrees, saying that in the case of parenting, "[t]he confrontation with disgust unlocks no special pleasures lurking within the disgusting." (1997, 136)

¹² Rozin et al. survey views linking core disgust with avoidance of infection, toxins and parasites (2008, esp. 758). Disgust has been culturally adapted to protect against moral threats, as discussed by Haidt et al. 1997.

own perspective, even though I do not believe they are in any way harmful: the mixture of milk and orange juice, my child's favorite beverage, is just one of many examples.

Social Control

As I've discussed, the suspension of my disgust response has been valuable in promoting intimacy with my child, knowledge about the functioning of his body, and a parenting style not characterized by excessive vigilance. It also, though, makes me unruly as an occupant of public space. While spit-up is no longer a staple of my wardrobe, I still can't be trusted to leave the house without a deposit of snot on my shoulder. Not normally given to exhibitionism, I didn't hesitate to lift my shirt in public when my child was breastfeeding. I have been known to change his dirty diaper in full view of others at the local park, and to take him to the grocery store showing all the signs of the vigorous mud play that occupied his afternoon at daycare. Worst of all, I can't be relied on to prevent him from eating chunks of muffin off the floor of the café.

This unruliness can be disturbing to others: particularly to non-parents who lack the experience of accommodating the rhythms of life to the realities of life with an infant, but also to parents who draw the lines of risk in different places or who are heavily invested in maintaining decorum. And this disturbance is often expressed as disgust, with its characteristic "nose wrinkle" and "retraction of the upper lip" (Rozin et al. 2008, 759).

Does this matter? Why not simply ignore dirty looks that emerge out of a perspective that one rejects, that is founded on ignorance or that isn't sufficiently responsive to the situation at hand? Of course, disregarding such responses is a central

element of mothering in public: I know that some people are made uncomfortable by my decision to breastfeed at Target, but I do it anyway, because I believe that breastfeeding is a normal, natural activity that should not have to be hidden. But to disregard these responses is not to be unaware of or unstung by them.

A sneer of disgust is quite different from an expression of annoyance. If I come to realize that my behavior is annoying someone, I can simply cease the behavior. Disgust, while perhaps triggered by an offending behavior, often takes the person rather than the behavior as its principal target. To be disgusted is to see the target of disgust as contaminated, and there is no quick behavioral fix for contamination.

Moreover, annoyance is a sentiment that can be expressed among equals: when I ask someone to stop mindlessly tapping their pen on the table, or simply shoot them an irritated look, I am not thereby implying they are inferior to me. Indeed, to express annoyance in this way is often to convey an expectation that they will be responsive to my concerns, that they are sufficiently civilized as to care about the preferences of others (though they may be guilty of temporary neglect). To be disgusted by another person, however, does appear centrally to involve seeing her as degraded, as occupying a lower status, perhaps irretrievably.¹³ The conditions productive of disgust are signs that she has not sufficiently internalized the norms of civilized society: she is either ignorant of or indifferent to them, and either of these, in an adult, is a sign that she suffers from a rather serious, even morally laden defect.

I have used the word “civilized” to describe the state of internalizing social norms and being responsive to the preferences of others that is violated by the person who is

¹³ Miller (1997, esp. ch. 10) discusses this matter at length.

judged disgusting. This is not my coinage: “Civilization,” writes Miller, in explicating the views of Norbert Elias, “requires the lowering of the thresholds of disgust and embarrassment, that is, it requires the easier triggering of these emotions” (1997, 172). As a society is civilized, behaviors that could once be performed in public must be relocated into private space (1997, 177). The breast that nourishes the infant (and the infant along with it) must be hidden beneath a “nursing drape,” and the child dirty from play must be whisked home from daycare for a bath and change of clothes before being allowed into public space. A failure to adhere to these norms, and to feel the disgust that would motivate adherence, marks a mother as uncivilized.

But the situation is, of course, more complicated than this. It’s not that the mother never internalized these norms; instead, a disgust response that was previously well established has relaxed, and she has adjusted – lowered, by the lights of civilized society – her standards. She remains fully aware of the norms, and of the force they hold for others; rather than being oblivious to others’ expressions of disgust, she steels herself against them. To internalize the norms of civilized society is to be susceptible to shame when one is the object of others’ disgust. In my own experience, my shame response remained fully operative even as my disgust response relaxed. If I had to do the sort of effortful overcoming Miller describes, it was not disgust but shame that I had to overcome: and this overcoming was at most partial. I remain keenly aware of disapproving gazes even as I affect indifference, and this exacts an emotional toll that is compounded by the stress and lack of sleep that already accompany my condition as a mother.

The consequences of being the object of others' disgust are not only emotional; they also involve material constraints. The mere fact that most people believe a behavior is disgusting has been repeatedly advanced as a reason to make the behavior illegal.¹⁴ Though breastfeeding in public has not been prohibited in any US jurisdiction, this has not prevented women from suffering penalties.¹⁵ In October 2006, a family was removed from an airplane and forced to delay travel until the following day because a mother's breastfeeding was regarded as offensive by a flight attendant. In 2003, another set of parents lost custody of their children for six months and were arrested and charged with "sexual performance of a child," a felony carrying a penalty of up to 20 years' imprisonment, after a technician who processed a photo of the mother breastfeeding her one-year-old contacted Child Protective Services.¹⁶

Other sorts of consequence may be less readily quantifiable, but still pernicious. Terrence Des Pres suggests that when people are regarded with disgust, they are more likely to be seen as suitable objects of mistreatment. To prevent people from washing or

¹⁴ See Nussbaum 2004, esp. ch. 3, and 2010, esp. ch. 1, for discussion.

¹⁵ As an anonymous reviewer has suggested, the case of breastfeeding raises the intertwined issues of obscenity and disgust: the act of breastfeeding elicits disgust because the mother's exposed breast is regarded as obscene. In some instances, the disgust response may be self-protective: the observer fears the sexual arousal that s/he might experience in response to the breast, and thus demands that the breast be covered while using a disgust response to mask the feeling of arousal.

¹⁶ Both cases, as well as other examples of harassment of breastfeeding mothers, are discussed in Marcus 2007.

using the toilet dehumanizes them in the eyes of others as well as in their own eyes, making them more vulnerable to abuse and less likely to vigorously resist it.¹⁷ If a mother is regarded with disgust, this may make her vulnerable to judgments, whether implicit or explicit, that she is less worthy of dignity and respect; she may even come to feel this way about herself.¹⁸

Mothering and Fathering

I have been speaking of mothers throughout this essay. But is there any reason to think that the phenomena under discussion are more applicable to mothers than to fathers? When it comes to the suspension of disgust, I am reluctant to generalize; as I have said, there are surely individual differences, and any anecdotal evidence I might collect could easily be skewed. To substantiate claims about gender differences would require empirical methods that are not in my philosopher's toolkit.¹⁹

¹⁷ Des Pres's excruciating analysis of the role of disgust in the Nazi death camps (1976, esp. 60-62) is discussed by Rozin & Fallon 1987, 28.

¹⁸ The disgust some people feel about public breastfeeding often moves women to breastfeed while sitting on the toilet in a bathroom stall; being forced into a disgusting situation by one's attempt to avoid causing disgust in others may trigger the sort of dehumanizing effect Des Pres mentions. I am grateful to Sheila Lintott for this point.

¹⁹ Empirical studies find, in general, that women are more susceptible to disgust than men; however, a recent study (Simpson et al. 2006) suggests that this gender difference is exhibited only for core disgust elicitors (e.g., vomit, wounds, cockroaches, feces) and not

When it comes to the role of disgust in social control, however, there are good reasons to expect that fathers will be less susceptible to its pernicious effects. Of course, there is the fact that fathers do not breastfeed, and that mothers continue to do much more of the total childcare labor than fathers in contemporary society. Mothers will thus more often be in situations that subject them to disgust related to their performance as parents, and will more often suffer the consequences.

However, there is more to it than this. Given social differences in how mothering and fathering are understood, I expect that mothers are more likely than fathers to be regarded with disgust, holding other details of the situation constant.

The extent to which a person is targeted by a disgust response depends, I take it, on the extent to which she is seen as responsible for the disgusting situation. If I step in dog feces by mistake, the disgusting contamination is purely physical, and clearing it up requires only removing the offending substance and its traces. If I touch feces under duress (say, to retrieve a set of car keys that has been dropped in an inopportune location), taking pains to have no more contact than I can possibly avoid, something similar is true: the contact was voluntary, but I am not to be blamed for it. But if I choose to have such contact for no compelling reason, the contamination is more than physical. It is psychic, and calls into question my suitability for human society: my civility, as we might call it based on the discussion above.

I suspect that fathers are less likely than mothers to be regarded as responsible for the disgusting situations that arise in parenting. For, fundamentally, a child is seen more

for socio-moral disgust elicitors (e.g., betrayal, racism, hypocrisy). I am not aware of any studies of the suspension of disgust in parenting.

as the mother's responsibility than as the father's. When a woman takes her child to the grocery store or the playroom at the public library, this is thought of as a regular aspect of her parental duties; and there is an expectation that she should have achieved mastery of such routine activities quite early in the child's life, such that there is no excuse for dirty clothes or snotty noses. When a father takes his child to the library or the store, however, this is seen as exceptional: the father is assumed not to have routine responsibility for the child, and thus lapses of hygiene are more likely to be attributed to the natural stumbling of someone who has been thrust into an unfamiliar situation, and thus seen as out of his control. It may even be thought that he inherited the child's disgusting condition from the unseen mother, who despite her absence bears the ultimate responsibility for maintaining the child's hygiene. While the child is disgusting, then, the father is not.

Moreover, the father is more likely to be seen as generous or charitable insofar as he is temporarily relieving the mother of her rightful duties, and this may mitigate the sort of morally charged disgust response that would otherwise be directed at him. Being exposed to conditions that would normally be regarded as contaminating in the course of charitable work, as with the homeless or with the desperately poor in a developing country, does not suggest that one is, oneself, fundamentally corrupted; indeed, exposure to disgusting conditions in the service of others may be seen as morally elevating, a sign of saintliness. If fathering is seen as a charitable activity while mothering is seen as the fulfillment of a routine duty of life, then the significance of the same disgusting conditions may be fundamentally different in the two cases.

Conclusion

I don't mean to overstate the case here. Mothering is fun and tremendously rewarding, and in my experience the suspension of disgust is part of what makes it so: my newfound ability to revel in dirt, snot, and spit, rather than having them serve as obstacles, is a manifestation of a joyous engagement with my child and in a new form of life that he has made possible.

At the same time, though, it's important to recognize the enduring mechanisms, both overt and subtle, through which the oppression of women is maintained even as society embraces egalitarian rhetoric. I have suggested that the suppression of the disgust response contributes to good mothering: it promotes valuable forms of intimacy and knowledge along with a parenting style that facilitates the child's exploration of the world. However, it also, by leading me to engage in unruly behavior that generates disgust responses in others, makes me vulnerable to subtle forms of dehumanization and assaults on my dignity. I could, no doubt, minimize these effects by acceding to the demands implicit in the disgusted gaze: retreating to the toilets to breastfeed; forgoing a quick trip to the grocery store after daycare; perpetually wiping, combing and tidying. But this would be to acquiesce in rather than to escape or resist the mechanisms of social control to which women are differentially subject. A form of life in which one is constantly, perhaps obsessively, working to preempt the disgusted gaze hardly seems preferable to a life in which one suffers that gaze.

Miller suggests that expressions of disgust, directed toward targets who are assigned a lower status, can be fruitfully met by expressions of contempt, which reestablish the target as a subject rather than mere object of social judgment (1997, chap. 9). Perhaps the inner work of mothering is to replace feelings of shame with a

lighthearted contempt for the societal norms that would demand it, and for the mechanisms of disgust by which those norms are enforced. The outer work, surely, is to dismantle them.

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