

# DISGUST AND ELEVATION: 70

## OPPOSING SOURCES OF “SPIRITUAL INFORMATION”

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IF EMOTIONS evolved to make us care about and respond to important events in our lives, then what are the emotions that underlie spiritual life? And what exactly are these emotions telling us?

Some emotions tell us that we live in a world of enormous beauty and complexity, a world that *feels* to us to be full of meaning and design. The emotion of awe, for example, seems to be a response both to direct encounters with divinity and to encounters with nature, art, or music, in which we are transported out of our everyday selves and feel in some way to be nearer to heaven (Keltner and Haidt, 2003).

Other emotions tell us that we live in a world of bounty and generosity. Gratitude may have evolved as part of a suite of emotions that help humans engage in trade and long-term reciprocal alliances (Trivers, 1971), but many people feel what McCullough et al. (2001) call “cosmic gratitude,” that is, gratitude for the simple gift of life and for all the good things in it.

Still other emotions tell us that we live in a world where people show greater or lesser degrees of divinity in their actions. This essay is about a pair of opposing but related emotions—disgust and elevation—that help us navigate the social world by providing us with spiritual information about our fellow human beings and what is noble, decent, and virtuous in ourselves and others.

### *Disgust and the “Wisdom of Repugnance”*

Disgust is a fascinating and underappreciated emotion. It appears to have been shaped by evolution to help our omnivorous ancestors figure out what to eat while simultaneously avoiding various sources of bacterial and parasitic infection (e.g., from corpses, waste products, certain animals, and each other). Disgust allowed our ancestors to go beyond immediate sensory information and to reject foods (or people) based on what these foods (or people) had touched previously. Since bacteria and parasites spread by contact, this kind of contamination sensitivity makes good evolutionary sense.

But somewhere along the line, disgust became a social emotion, too. My colleagues and I have studied disgust in several cultures, and, while the specific elicitors of disgust may vary, all cultures we looked at have a concept of an emotion that responds both to physical things (including certain foods, animals, body products, corpses, and violations of the external envelope of the body) as well as to a subset of social violations. A study we did in Japan and the United States (Haidt et al.,

1997) indicated a great deal of similarity for the physical elicitors, but a larger degree of difference for the social elicitors. For Americans, social disgust was a response to cruelty, racism, and other cases where one person stripped away the dignity of another. The Japanese, however, extended the word *ken'o* from the physical world into the social world to apply to cases where the self had failed to achieve the proper fit into society, either because of a personal failure or because others were treating the person as a nonentity.

Thus, the emotion of disgust seems to work in both cultures to provide moral information about violations of some of the culture's most important values. American morality, with its extreme emphasis on rights and individuality, seems to use social disgust as a way to reinforce the importance of the person, while Japanese morality, with its greater emphasis on harmony and interdependence, may use social disgust to support the importance of the group.

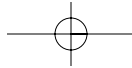
The idea that disgust provides moral information has been discussed recently by the ethicist Leon Kass (chairman of President Bush's Council on Bioethics). Kass is concerned about the continual encroachment of a utilitarian and technocratic ethos into medical decision making in which the sacredness and dignity of human life is ignored. In discussing human cloning, Kass (2001) writes:

In some crucial cases, however, repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power completely to articulate it. Can anyone really give an argument fully adequate to the horror that is father-daughter incest (even with consent), or bestiality, or the mutilation of a corpse, or the eating of human flesh, or the rape or murder of another human being?

Kass argues that we should take our feelings of disgust into account when thinking about matters such as cloning, assisted suicide, and reproductive technologies. We should not follow these feelings blindly—indeed, some practices that used to trigger disgust (such as interracial marriage) we have now come to fully accept. But, as Kass says, “Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.”

### *The Spiritual Dimension of Social Cognition*

My colleagues and I have been trying to understand the “wisdom of repugnance” for many years. Why do certain social violations trigger disgust, while others trigger anger, or contempt, or indifference? From our review of both anthropological and psychological sources, our best explanation is this: Human cultures generally order their social space in terms of a vertical dimension, running from God and moral perfection above to demons and moral evil below. Human beings are generally seen as being suspended precariously somewhere in the middle, capable of rising to godly sainthood or falling to bestiality or “subhuman” behavior. The medieval *scala natura* and the Hindu notion of reincarnation at higher or lower levels, depending on one's actions in life (karma), illustrate this vertical dimension. Social disgust can then be understood as the emotional reaction people have to witnessing others moving “down,” or exhibiting their lower, baser, less God-like nature. We



feel revolted by moral depravity, and this revulsion has some overlap, and also some difference, with the revulsion we feel toward rotten food and cockroaches (Rozin et al., 2000).

But if this powerful negative emotion can be triggered by seeing people move “down” on the vertical dimension, then what happens when we see people move “up”? Is there a corresponding positive emotion triggered by seeing people manifesting their higher, better, more saintly nature?

### *Elevation and the Wisdom of Thomas Jefferson*

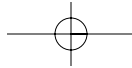
I believe that there is such an emotion, and that it was best described more than two hundred years ago by Thomas Jefferson. In 1771, Jefferson’s friend Robert Skipwith wrote to him asking for advice on what books to buy for his own library. Jefferson loved to give advice and he loved books, so he embraced the chance to give advice about books. Along with a list of suggested titles in history, philosophy, and other branches of learning, he sent a letter making the case for the inclusion of literature. Great works of fiction, he said, contribute to our moral education by making us feel the right feelings:

[E]very thing is useful which contributes to fix us in the principles and practice of virtue. When any . . . act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions; and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body, acquire strength by exercise. (Jefferson, 1771/1975, 350)

Jefferson went on to say that the physical feelings and motivational effects caused by a good novel are as powerful as those caused by real episodes:

[I ask whether] the fidelity of Nelson, and generosity of Blandford in *Mar-montel* do not dilate [the reader’s] breast, and elevate his sentiments as much as any similar incident which real history can furnish? Does he not in fact feel himself a better man while reading them, and privately covenant to copy the fair example?

Jefferson was saying quite explicitly that emotions give us moral information. He specifically cites “disgust” as giving us an “abhorrence of vice,” and he describes an unnamed emotion that impresses us with the beauty of virtuous deeds and makes us want to do “charitable and grateful acts also.” Jefferson then goes on to describe this emotion in much the same way that a modern emotion theorist would—by breaking it down into its component parts: elicitors, physiological changes, motivations, and subjective feelings. The elicitors of this moral emotion include acts of charity, gratitude, fidelity, and generosity. The physiological effects are said to be in the chest, a feeling of dilation (opening). The motivation is clearly moral self-



improvement, wanting to copy the virtuous exemplar. The subjective feelings of this emotional state include elevated sentiments and feeling oneself to be a better person.

It is this last component that suggests to me that this moral information is also spiritual information. Jefferson's unnamed emotion tells us about what is best in life, and gives us a glimpse of a higher and nobler way of being.

### *Moral Information Is Spiritual Information*

It is a lovely coincidence that I happen to work at Jefferson's university—the University of Virginia—where statues of Jefferson and inscriptions bearing his words surround students and faculty alike, inspiring us even as we exercise in the gymnasium. The coincidence is particularly lovely because my recent research has begun to prove Jefferson right.

For the last few years, I have been studying Jefferson's emotion, which I call "elevation" (both because of Jefferson's phrase "elevated sentiments" and because of its fit with the vertical spiritual dimension of social cognition I described earlier). I have asked people to recall times when they witnessed a good deed and compared what they wrote to times when they got something good for themselves. I have shown people video clips about Mother Teresa and about an eleven-year-old boy who founded a shelter for the homeless, and I have compared their responses to those of people who watched video clips of comedians. I have found that viewing or thinking about acts of moral beauty causes the set of responses that Jefferson described: feelings in the chest (sometimes described as a warm or open feeling) coupled with a motivation to help others and a feeling of being uplifted oneself (Haidt, 2003). I am now looking into the possibility that elevation can be used in moral education programs, inspiring young people in ways that more traditional teaching techniques cannot.

I believe that elevation is one of the most important emotions underlying human spiritual life and spiritual growth. It is a surprising and very beautiful fact about our species that each of us can be moved to tears by the sight of a stranger helping another stranger. It is an even more beautiful fact that these feelings sometimes motivate us to change our own behavior, values, and goals. Narratives of the lives of Jesus, Buddha, Mother Teresa, and other inspiring figures are full of stories of people who, upon meeting the saintly figure, dropped their former materialistic pursuits and devoted themselves to advancing the mission of the one who elevated them.

If elevation is an emotion that creates disciples and helps moral visions to spread, then elevation has changed our world. Elevation and its opposing emotion, disgust, provide us with a constant stream of emotionally charged spiritual information, telling us not just who is good, but what is good.



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