Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan

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Moral Disgust and Imaginative Resistance

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ABSTRACT. Unlike the emotional responses of fear, horror or anger, the role of moral disgust in our engagement with fiction has not been adequately studied. The main aim of this paper is to examine the role of disgust in moral reasoning in order to establish a basis for tackling some key problems in our engagement with fiction, such as imaginative resistance. Drawing insights from phenomenological accounts, moral disgust is seen as a potentially rational response to our engagement with morally deviant perspectives and narratives. In the first part of the essay, it is argued that moral disgust is caused by the narrative under which an agent organizes, colours, and presents their actions - and, consequently, the value-laden load they attach to those actions. The second part of the essay examines the hypothesis that moral disgust functions as a psychological boundary that limits our ability to imaginatively engage with fiction. The paper concludes by showing how moral disgust relates to certain versions of imaginative resistance that involve first-personal imaginative engagement with the perspective of evil characters in morally deviant fictional worlds.

1. Introduction

In this presentation I will investigate the hypothesis that moral disgust is related to a key problem in philosophy of art, namely imaginative resistance. On the first part of my presentation I will suggest an account of moral disgust, and on the second part I will explore the hypothesis that moral disgust functions as a psychological boundary that limits our ability to imaginatively engage with fiction. I will conclude, first, that placing fictional characters' evil actions or behaviours within a narrative that confers upon them moral justification strikes us as a perversion of the value framework that is potentially dangerous and corrosive towards our own moral system and triggers the reaction of moral disgust. Second, I will relate moral

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disgust to certain versions of imaginative resistance that involve first-personal imaginative engagement with the perspective of evil characters in morally deviant fictional worlds.

2. What is moral disgust?

In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean contemplates the possibility that an innocent man may be imprisoned through his own [Valjean's] fault. The thought of such behaviour makes him feel *disgust*:

> to let things take their course, to let the good God do as he liked, was simply horrible; to allow this error of fate and of men to be carried out, not to hinder it, to lend himself to it through his silence, to do nothing, in short, was to do everything! […] that it was a base, cowardly, sneaking, abject, hideous crime! For the first time in eight years, the wretched man had just tasted the bitter savor of an evil thought and of an evil action. He spit it out with disgust. (Part I, Book Seven, pp. 205-206)

It seems that in our daily lives, we evaluate acts as evil or morally reprehensible - from simple mistakes and pettiness to theft, hypocrisy and murder. Sometimes, however, our reaction goes beyond the parameters of moral disapproval and manifests itself as a revulsion towards moral violations such as betrayal, deception, servility or plotting against an innocent (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). While some argue that moral disgust is merely a metaphor describing an emotional state of anger or contempt, others contend that it is a distinct psychological state, that distinguishes itself both from physical disgust and other moral emotions. Scholars who support the existence of moral disgust agree that it serves as a mechanism to avoid morally reprehensible acts or behaviours that are contagious and capable of undermining social cohesion. However, they do not seem to be able to explain which properties are responsible for contagiousness, and, whether we always perceive it as such. On the one hand, assessing contagiousness requires sensitivity to the subject's contact history (Rozin et al., 2009, p. 121) and, in this sense, is linked to monitoring a subject's mode of action. On the other hand, as we follow a series of events or vicious acts and the subject's mode of action, we also become aware of how the agent himself presents or explains these acts. Therefore, I believe that for a better understanding of moral disgust, we should move away from approaches that focus exclusively on contagion, and look at phenomenological approaches that focus on disgust as a reaction to both the mode of action and the agent's own integration of the acts into an explanatory

framework.

Sara Heinämaa (2022), building on the positions of Kolnai, Sartre and Kristeva, argues that moral disgust is similar to physical disgust: both are affective reactions to behaviours and modes of action, rather than to types or motives for action. According to Heinämaa, there is a common structure to experiences of disgust, whether they involve physical stimuli (e.g., slimy substances, decaying bodies) or vicious behaviours. This common structure in the experience of disgust consists in their appearance as disproportional: in the case of moral stimuli, we perceive a disproportion between the way one behaves and the content of one's action. We do not, for instance, expect Hannibal Lecter to adopt the 'gastronomic, elegant and artistic attitude he displays towards his victims', because this seems out of scale and disproportionate to the heinous crimes he commits. Analogously, what is morally disgusting about the actions of serial killer Charles Manson is the 'quasi-political and quasi-religious tone he gives to them' (Heinämaa, 2020, p. 388).[255]

The disparity between the content of the act and the attitude of the agent that Heinämaa draws attention to, in my view arises from the way in which the morally wrong act is presented - that is, from the way in which the agent invests her vicious behaviour with value. I claim, in other words, that moral disgust concerns the agent's narrative: the way in which she thinks about, connects and explains a series of events or actions (by herself and others), attributing to them a unified value and moral content. We feel moral disgust because we perceive an asymmetry between the content of the agent's vicious actions and the way the agent herself interprets, evaluates and presents her actions.

Disgust identifies morally vicious ways of viewing reality and motivates us to avoid engaging with narratives that may "contaminate" our own moral perception.[256] Summing up,

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[255] A problem in how Heinämaa formulates her position is the use of Robert Audi's view of the 'manner' of a behaviour as a basis for the claim that moral disgust is an emotion of an adverbial type, i.e. it is directed at the manner in which an act is performed and not at the kind of act itself. However, there is an ambiguity in the examples of Hannibal Lecter and Charles Manson that Heinämaa cites, as they seem to address how an act is presented by the agent himself. There is a difference between how an agent acts (how, say, he commits the crime) from how he himself presents his action. This paper takes into account the positions of Kristeva and Sartre, on which Heinämaa is based, as well as Miller's, to place emphasis on the way the act is presented in the agent's narrative. I am grateful to Katerina Bantinaki for urging me to clarify this point.

[256] Phenomenological approaches tend to challenge theories based on contagion (Heinämaa, 2020, p. 382). However, an approach based on phenomenological premises on moral disgust is not necessarily incompatible with the recognition of the functional role of emotion: accepting the position that the functional role of moral disgust concerns the avoidance of contaminating behaviours does not entail that what is perceived as morally disgusting is connected to contagiousness or to beliefs about the contagiousness of certain types of behaviour.

my claim is that the incorporation of the agent's vicious actions or behaviours in a narrative that offers them moral, political, or religious justification strikes us as a perversion of our framework of values. Moral disgust is not a reaction to particular features of morally wrong actions, but a potentially rational emotional reaction to our engagement with morally deviant perspectives and narratives.

3. Moral Disgust and Imaginative Resistance

The question I want to examine next is whether moral disgust, understood as a reaction to the way a narrative presents vicious behaviour, affects our engagement with the fictional work. Is it possible, in other words, that moral disgust acts as a psychological boundary that limits our ability to engage imaginatively with fiction? I will attempt to contribute to the discussion about imaginative resistance by exploring the role of moral disgust in our imaginative engagement with deviant moral fictional worlds. I will argue that the difficulty in imaginative engagement with a work of art hinges on the feeling of moral disgust that is caused by the narrator's distortion of the moral order.[257]

We experience moral aversion not because of the representation of morally problematic characters or actions, but because of the way the narrative presents them: as embedded in a fictional world in which what is morally wrong appears as socially acceptable and obligatory. In such cases, the fictional world *appears to us as morally repugnant*. As I will attempt to show, although we usually accept the narrative's propositions as fictionally true, and thus take the narrator's perspective and through it relate to the main characters, moral disgust functions as a mechanism of psychological resistance to the narrative or, alternatively, as a mechanism that prevents a perspective-shifting in order to imagine ourselves in the hero's shoes. The problem, in other words, arises from the role of moral disgust in relation to certain imaginative mechanisms that are expected to be activated when we relate to the narrative. But let us look more specifically at what we mean when we refer to imaginative engagement with a work of art.

When we follow the plot unfolding and, furthermore, regard the (moral) premises of the

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[257] The idea that moral disgust as a reaction to morally contaminating behaviours is associated with imaginative resistance, has recently been highlighted (Tuna, 2018) and empirically explored (Black & Barnes, 2017), but not yet sufficiently investigated.

narrator as true in the fictional world, we take his perspective and engage with the plot. The way the narrator describes events (using, for example, adverbs such as 'fortunately', 'surprisingly', 'unfortunately', 'obviously', etc.) and the heroes, reveals an evaluative attitude towards them, e.g., of irony, approval, sympathy, contempt (Walton, 1990, p. 366). In this sense, our access to the story and fictional heroes is mediated by the narrator's perspective and, therefore, our engagement with the characters draws on the value system within which the narrator has placed them. His perspective is embedded in the way we perceive the story's characters and, depending on the type of narrator, this may be more or less transparent.

In many cases, the way the narrator presents the story allows us to do something more than merely activate a kind of imagination to contemplate counterfactual possibilities: it also enables us to become emotionally involved with the attitudes of the characters, which requires of us a kind of 'genuine rehearsal, a "testing" of a point of view and an understanding of what it is like to experience it' (Moran, 1994, p. 105). While this kind of imagination is not required for engagement in every work of fiction, nor is it the only mode of imaginative engagement, I think we should acknowledge that a better understanding of certain works requires the reader's first-personal imaginative engagement.

For instance, Alexandros Papadiamantis's novel *The Murderess* will have achieved its aim if we end up feeling sympathy for the old Hadoula because the narrative compels us to enter her mind and to imaginatively experience her disturbed mental state and her divergent ideas as somehow convincing and coherent. This is different, however, from a case of counterfactual reasoning and an attempt to understand what can happen when a person's mind "outgrows itself". Even though Hadoula commits heinous crimes while in a state of delusion, we relate to her because we can for a time fictionally adopt her anxieties, fears, bitterness - perhaps even her murderous impulses. We enter imaginatively into the moral world of the story (Dain, 2021, p. 261) by taking a character's perspective - in other words, by participating in a shared ethical framework that is broader than any set of fictional parameters.

A central way in which we first-personally engage with the fictional universe draws on the imaginative reconstruction of the characters' experience through a mechanism of simulated imagination (Currie, 1995; Steuber, 2006; Goldie, 2000).[258] Simply put, we can use our

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[258] The entire discussion assumes that we react empathically or can adopt the perspective of fictional characters in much the same way we engage with real agents.

imagination to switch perspectives, which allows us to simulate or recreate first-personally the thoughts or feelings of someone else. This idea leads to two main possibilities for ways of first-personal engagement with fictional characters (Goldie, 2000). One possibility is to imagine that *we ourselves are the character* and take her perspective on the fictional world - that is, to imagine the actions, thoughts, and feelings as she experiences them. This process is referred to as 'empathetic perspective-shifting' (Goldie, 2000) or 'other-oriented perspective-taking' (Coplan, 2004). This type of imaginative engagement with a work of fiction can be attained when I imagine *centrally* the character's narrative - that is, what a character knows, believes or feels, through an awareness that the hero is the source of my perspective and that this perspective primarily belongs to her.[259] Essentially, empathic imagination is a strong case of perspective-shifting, since it requires one to try to imagine being someone else, as having the characterization of the fictional hero.

A second possibility is to adopt the character's perspective by imagining that *we* are in the character's shoes while and experiencing what he or she feels, knows or perceives. This process is also referred to as 'in-his-shoes perspective-shifting' (Goldie, 2000),[260] or as taking the other person's perspective but by using myself as the starting-point (self-oriented perspective-taking) (Coplan, 2004). This is a less demanding type of perspective-shifting since we retain some of our own characterisation and adopt certain aspects of the fictional character's characterisation in order to imaginatively reconstruct his narrative.

4. Moral disgust and empathetic resistance

Thomas Szanto (2020) recently attempted to explain some cases of imaginative resistance through the above distinction between the two different types of imaginative reconstruction of

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[259] The term 'central' is Richard Wollheim's and he uses it to describe the imaginative process by which the subject does not imagine the narrative of the other from an external point of view, but from his or her own perspective. For example, when I imagine a swimmer in this way, I do not imagine myself swimming in the ocean from a point high above the sea; I imagine myself swimming in the ocean from the swimmer's point of view. I don't imagine the expression of fear on my face, because I don't see my face. What I do imagine is having the experience of salt in my mouth, of being swept along by a very strong current, of being scared (see Vendler, 1979, p. 161).

[260] According to Goldie, an agent's characterisation/description includes his or her particular character traits, emotional dispositions and other aspects of his or her personality (e.g., being kind, being consistent, having a phobia of dogs, being depressed). It also includes non-psychological items about him or her (being a lawyer, growing up in Alabama in the 1960s) (Goldie, 2000, 198).

the first-personal perspective of a vicious person. More specifically, Szanto attributes imaginative resistance to an inability to empathetic perspective-shifting when the narrative fails to provide an adequate characterization of the hero. Here, Szanto argues, empathetic perspective-shifting is replaced by in-his-shoes perspective-shifting. However, this attempt at perspective shifting also fails when our own moral-psychological premises conflict with those of the hero. For Szanto, in other words, we experience resistance to imaginative engagement with a narrative either as a result of a failure of empathetic perspective-shifting, or because of an inability for by in-his-shoes perspective-shifting.

Let's take a closer look at what happens when we attempt to relate imaginatively to a morally familiar fictional world. In order to enter imaginatively into the narrative universe, we draw on or presuppose information about the larger fictional moral context that is not included in the narrative. Given that a fictional world does not differ significantly from the real one as far as the moral code is concerned, we draw on our own tacit background knowledge, - a network of skills, abilities and behavioural dispositions that provide us with information about the world (and moral judgements). In other words, the way we perceive virtues and vices, whether in life or in art, depends and draws on a practical knowledge of how to act that is shaped by our upbringing and our participation in the relevant social practices. Moral character functions as a 'second nature' (McDowell, 1996) which allows us to perceive a moral reality by seeing an action as right or wrong, and to determine the reasons for our actions.

The problem arises when, in order to engage first-personally with morally deviant fictional worlds, the narrative requires us to accept as fictionally true propositions morally false ones. This means that we must isolate our own background knowledge and access the background knowledge of the character of the morally divergent fictional world, so that we may imagine that we are this hero and therefore have his thoughts and moral sentiments. And it is precisely because the fictional ethical framework differs substantially from ours, empathetic perspective-shifting needs to include all those aspects of the agent's characterization that differ from ours, the dispositions that influence conscious beliefs and feelings, even though the agent herself does not explicitly attribute these dispositions to herself.

Szanto claims that the empathetic perspective-shifting only fails when there is 'insufficient narrative information and characterization. This is information that would normally allow me to succeed in isolating my own moral perspective from that of the other'

(Szanto, 2020, p. 800). On the other hand, when, Szanto claims, the narrative provides a rich characterization of the hero - that is, it provides the adequate moral-psychological and other information - then even if the character's moral sensibilities and dispositions are radically different from my own, it is possible for me to relate empathically with her. In other words, if a substantial description of the character is available, then we can isolate our own background knowledge in order to access the background knowledge of the character within a morally deviant fictional world and thus empathically relate to her.

Szanto's thesis correctly identifies the connection between first-personal imaginative engagement and imaginative resistance. But it downplays the difficulties, in the form of the reader's tacit background knowledge, in empathetic perspective-taking, while relying on a distorted view of how we relate to another agent's mental states.[261] As I argue, the fact that Szanto's connects imaginative resistance with difficulties in first-personal engagement relies on a practically impossible assumption about empathetic perspective-taking. Suppose, for instance, that there is a version of Papadiamantis *The Murderes*s in which the narrator identifies with the perspective of the old Hadoula and presents her act of murdering little girls as socially and morally right. If I engage in empathetic perspective-shifting, I am imagining that I am Hadula herself and reasoning morally like her, so that the murders of little girls are justified. Suppose also that the story provides a rich narrative context for the fictionally true propositions, a context that is coherent and clear (e.g., little girls pollute the social fabric, the girls' mothers back Hadula's decision since there's nothing worse than being born a woman, etc.), and that, furthermore, I am able to isolate my background knowledge.

However, as Goldie (2011) explains, in the context of this attempt to empathetic perspective-taking what I can do is undertake a reflective engagement with a set of mental states and a knowledge that should be in the background.[262] That is to say, in attempting to take the fictional character's perspective, I do not reconstruct a set of beliefs and dispositions

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[261] The following discussion draws on my earlier work on she mechanisms of empathic response to artworks (Kyprianidou, 2017), which was based on Peter Goldie's theses on the adoption of a perspective as it appears in his later work (Goldie, 2011).

[262] They are not, that is, conscious mental states to which we relate reflectively (e.g., beliefs, desires), as Dustin Stokes (2006, pp. 403-404) seems to think when he talks about 'backgrounding' actual conscious states in order to imagine counterfactual propositions. These are implicit, irreducible, expectations and beliefs that actors have regarding their shared beliefs about a familiar world.

to which I relate in a non-reflective way, but I objectify them and, as such, I do not relate to them first-personally. But, in fact, the primary kind of engagement with psychological dispositions and background knowledge is non-reflective.[263] For example, part of being evil brings into the picture dispositions that are in the background and are implicitly activated, even though the agent does not explicitly attribute them to himself. Objectifying morally deviant beliefs and dispositions means that we do not 'surrender ourselves' to them, but maintain instead a psychological distance. Since, therefore, there is no appropriate first-personal engagement with dispositions and beliefs that make up a character's description, our own implicit background knowledge gets in the way of the effort to empathically adopt a perspective. In particular, in narratives of evil heroes in morally divergent fictional worlds, our own dispositions that direct our moral perception cannot be set aside or 'silenced' but are always already linked to specific reactions, such as moral disgust. So contrary to what Szanto claims, it is not that empathetic perspective-taking fails because the narrative might not provide a substantial description of the fictional character; it fails because it is practically impossible. Therefore, imaginative resistance cannot be explained as a failure of an empathetic perspective-shifting.

I now turn to the hypothesis of the less 'ambitious' type of first-personal engagement, in-his-shoes perspective-shifting, - imagining, that is, that we are in the position of the evil hero within an 'immoral' fictional world. Szanto argues that, in this case, we experience imaginative resistance that results from the conflict between, on the one hand, our beliefs, moral and psychological perceptions and emotional dispositions and, on the other, the characterization of the hero. I would like, however, to propose a different explanation of imaginative resistance to in-his-shoes perspective-shifting, by taking into account the difference between relating to an evil character within a familiar fictional world and relating to an evil character within an 'immoral' fictional world.

As we have already seen, it is not generally difficult for us to feel sympathy with evil heroes or to side with them if the narrative demands this. When we operate within a familiar fictional world we are generally able to imaginatively 'test' their perspectives, because we are not afraid of being morally tainted or of risking moral corruption. The familiar moral

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[263] For these reasons, moreover, in his later work Goldie (2011) rejects the empathic adoption of a perspective as incoherent, because it issues in a distorted picture of how we know our own mental states.

framework acts as a safety net within which we feel safe to relate to evil characters within the background of our imaginative engagement with the narrative. We are not required to change our background beliefs: the fictional moral context is not substantially different from the actual one. The narrative, for instance, treats Tony Soprano, the leader of a New Jersey mafia family, sympathetically. Yet, it is clear that in the fictional universe of the television series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007, HBO), Tony is not only facing legal prosecution, but is also a villain (Carroll, 2013, p. 372). But one can still sympathize with him because, among other things, he possesses certain positive values (e.g., intelligence or fortitude) or exhibits certain moral behaviours (e.g., love for his family) (Carroll, 2013). I might wish to take his perspective perhaps because I would like to experience what it is like to be powerful, ruthless, and above the law. Given, however, that the fictional moral context remains clear and that, moreover, I am not required to change my background beliefs, the narrative does not threaten to contaminate my broader moral perspective on the world. As a result, I do not experience moral disgust.

The problem of imaginative resistance emerges when in-his-shoes perspective-shifting requires 'opening up' to a corrupt fictional world whose values I must imaginatively espouse in order to relate first-personally to the desires of an evil hero. As first-personal engagement with the narrative requires us to imaginatively evaluate the world in a morally objectionable way, moral disgust is triggered as a guardian of our value system: what we desire to desire is an indication of our moral character (Stokes, 2006) which we seek to safeguard against 'testing' perspectives that may contaminate our evaluative stances and dispositions. Our resistance towards perspective-shifting within an evil world is not difficult to explain, given that fiction can often change or influence the way we think about certain moral values: *Anna Karenina*, for example, may 'soften' our attitudes towards adultery. Changing our perspective by putting ourselves in the shoes of the evil character and fictionally experiencing what it is like to live in a world with a completely different value system seems to carry the risk of altering some preferences, dispositions and attitudes.[264]

So, while we have argued that the empathetic perspective-shifting is an impossibility, in-

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[264] A further examination of these topics is necessary in order to assess the role of moral disgust in the conative imagination, but also its possible connection with 'transformative experiences' (Paul, 2021). I leave this topic for a separate discussion.

his-shoes perspective-shifting in an immoral fictional world is not desirable. Engaging with morally deviant perspectives and narratives causes moral disgust, which is a potentially rational response to the possibility of moral corruption.

5. Concluding Remarks

Moral disgust functions as a cautionary affective mechanism that prompts us to control our first-personal imaginative and affective engagement with characters within fictional worlds that are evaluatively discrepant. It activates a resistance to imaginative engagement, since we do not wish to change our perspective by putting ourselves in the shoes of the character of such an 'immoral' fictional world, which in turn prevents us from engaging first-personally and experientially with the narrative. It is an open question whether the present analysis applies to every instance of imaginative resistance, since it remains unclear if all instances of imaginative resistance can be explained in the same way.

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