

# Ambivalence of Disgust: Aurel Kolnai on the Significance of the Secondary Intention

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**Abstract.** Today, scholars struggle to provide a coherent account of the unique, unitary structure of disgust as portrayed in Aurel Kolnai's essay *On Disgust*. And even though Kolnai stressed that ambivalence was the main *challenge* in accounting for the essence the phenomenon, it had yet to receive its proper treatment by scholars. In this paper, I highlight the importance of the constitutive elements of disgust in establishing a structurally coherent, unitary, originary sense of the phenomenon. By highlighting and elucidating the connections between Kolnai's account of ambivalence, double intention and life and death, I am able to evince several key misconceptions of his theory, and thereby comprehensively account for the unitary structure of disgust.

**Keywords:** disgust, ambivalence, Kolnai, life, death, secondary intention

## Šleikštulio dvilypumas: Aurelis Kolnai apie antrinės intencijos svarbą

**Santrauka.** Šiandien tyrinėtojams vis dar sunkiai sekasi nuosekliai paaiškinti Aurelio Kolnai šleikštulį (pristatomą jo esė *Apie šleikštulį*) kaip struktūriškai vienalytį, unikalų. Nepaisant to, kad Kolnai ne kartą pabrėžė ambivalentiškumą kaip pagrindinį *iššūkį* apibrėžiant fenomeno esmę, išsamus šios savybės tyrimas vis dar nepasirodęs. Straipsnyje pirmiausia atkreipiamas dėmesys į grindžiamųjų šleikštulio elementų svarbą struktūriniam nuoseklumui, vienalytiškumui ir genezei. Išryškinami ir nuskaidrinami ryšiai tarp Kolnai ambivalentiškumo sampratos, dvigubos intencijos, gyvenimo bei mirties. Analizuojamos labiausiai klaidinančios jo teorijos interpretacijos ir taip visapusiškai pristatoma unikali, bet darni šleikštulio struktūra.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** šleikštulys, ambivalentiškumas, Kolnai, gyvenimas, mirtis, antrinė intencija

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## Introduction

Today, scholars still struggle to provide a coherent account of the many nuances of Kolnai's structurally coherent conception of disgust, and for good reason. Although, Kolnai's initial treatment of it as a *mode of aversion* is methodical, properly understanding the root of its character poses certain difficulties. The most pertinent of these difficulties is the inability to clearly account for the ambivalent character of disgust, which in turn leads to an inability to convey a comprehensive conception of Kolnai's account of disgust as such.

The vast majority of studies deal with exact descriptions of minute details in Kolnai's analysis that coherently align with our everyday experiences, and which also enrich the scientific discourse. Even if they accurately present the main features of the phenomenon, contextualize them culturally, historically, etc., most of these accounts fall short of properly accounting for the nature of ambivalence at the heart of disgust.

Naturally, there is room for scholars to take various approaches to Kolnai's account of disgust and the topic overall. Most accounts at least partially overlook the originality of Kolnai's thesis as well as his contribution to the phenomenology of ambivalence, disgust, and emotions. There is a certain tendency for scholars to be blind to those elements that constitute "the frame of its tonality as a defense" (Kolnai 2004: 47). The uncovering and presentation of such elements will be the focal point of this essay.

This paper primarily aims to properly address the *difficulties* that have inhibited other scholars from conveying a structurally coherent conception of disgust. Broadly speaking, this paper takes the overarching attitude of as attentively and coherently as possible of tracing Kolnai's intellectual motivations, methodological choices, and the outcome of those choices. In particular, it will focus on presenting the formal sense of disgust, the main character of disgust and then elucidate the essential grounding elements of it. Finally, the importance of the secondary intention of disgust, its ambivalence, the surplus of life and intention towards death, their foundational value, and substantial proximity will all be highlighted, all for the sake of uncovering the unique character of disgust.

## Misreading Kolnai

Most interpretations of Kolnai's treatment of disgust have done justice to the broad strokes of his analysis, as scholars have taken note of the importance of his categories of life and death towards a formation of a defense reaction. However, in the end, they are unable to clearly frame them as key aspects of the unique character of disgust, and do not account for how they relate to ambivalence. Overall, most scholars focus on *how* disgust is elicited, not *why*.

Ingrid Vendrel Ferran's interpretation of Kolnai's phenomenology by far takes the most contextual angle. In her treatment of Kolnai's philosophy, she observes his consistent phenomenological approach to the emotions, his subscription to early phenomenology, his value-realism and his moral rigor (see, e.g. Ferran 2015a, 2015b, 2018 and

other works on Kolnai). Ferran does take note of Kolnai's treatment of the categories of life and death and how they relate to disgust:

...with differences of coloring, all types of physical and moral disgust point to the same quality of the disgusting and are reactions to a certain objects, "which are constituted in such a way that they refer in a determinate manner to life and to death" (Kolnai 2004: 72). (Ferran 2020: 147)

Ferran also notes that Kolnai explicitly states that the ambivalent character of disgust should not be interpreted psychoanalytically, as a form of repression of norms (Ferran 2020: 148).

Lastly, Ferran takes note of Kolnai's remark on the importance of secondary intentions:

They intend the object or state of affairs that provokes them and, at the same time, they intend the well-being of the subject who experiences them (2004a: 36). (Ferran 2020: 147)

However, Ferran refrains from making any further comments. Despite highlighting many important parts of Kolnai's essay, she fails to identify certain foundational elements of his account of disgust, to articulate their importance, and to relate them to the character of disgust.

Another important scholar of Kolnai's philosophy and life, Francis Dunlop, in his monumental work on Kolnai's life *The Life and Thought of Aurel Kolnai*, takes note of the importance of one's intentions towards life and towards death while describing the third part of Kolnai's essay:

The fact is that what really attracts us in disgust is our own secret desire for death, for decomposition into our material elements. (Dunlop 2018: 125)

Naturally, Dunlop's book focuses on Kolnai's life and aims to historically and philosophically contextualize his philosophical works, rather than present a thorough analysis of them, hence why he does not expand upon this point any further.

In their introduction to the English translation of Kolnai's essay named *Visceral Values: Aurel Kolnai on Disgust*, Korsmeyer and Smith take extensive note of the ambivalent nature of the intention of disgust, but they ascribe it with a mostly aesthetic character:

The intentional direction of this emotion is almost entirely outward, and its focus on qualities implies a certain aesthetic nature of disgust ... [w]hat Kolnai has in mind, rather, is the Kantian doctrine of the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience, by which is meant that such experience cares little for the actual existence of its object but is wholly occupied with the qualities experienced. (Carolyn Korsmeyer et al. 2004: 9)

They later take note of the importance of death and life, specifically, that disgust walks "between life and death" (Carolyn Korsmeyer et al. 2004: 18), but they do not

elaborate upon this in any greater detail. Rather, they continue to enumerate Kolnai's understanding of the differences between disgust and other emotions.

Daniel O'Shiel initially follows Korsmeyer and Smith by emphasizing the aesthetic quality of disgust, but his phrasing is immediately more complex and truer to Kolnai's conception:

[...] disgust is an aesthetic (i.e. a *Sosein*-aware) capacity that is repulsed—and often simultaneously captivated by—a given phenomenon, giving rise to feelings of contamination, excess, and corruption, upon which ethical judgements are also often made. Underlying all of this, Kolnai claims, is an ever-present experience of a disturbing mixture of life and death. (O'Shiel 2015: 26)

O'Shiel closely follows Kolnai's analysis and further articulates his interpretation in the following terms:

Under this interpretation, disgust would always involve a strong offence to value in its formal structure, wherein a (temporary) dissolution of Kolnai's "metaphysical" distinction between ordered and purposeful existence on the one hand, and a meaningless, death-like form on the other, lies at the heart. (O'Shiel 2015: 26)

According to O'Shiel, the common experience of disgust originates from within the perception of the difference of purposeful, structured existence and the mixture of life, death, and the presentiment of an eroding boundary. But, his deduction does not rely on a secondary intention, which he argues is not important for Kolnai (O'Shiel 2015: 27), but on a reflective analysis of the experience of disgust which he connects to its aesthetic capacity. Despite such an interpretation, however, O'Shiel still gathers enough evidence to argue that every disgusting reaction is the expression of a violation of one's values. For O'Shiel, life and death are not foundational elements, but the perception and cognition of their difference *is*: every case of disgust occurs against the backdrop of making a judgment about higher and lower values. Thus, an object of disgust would have more value without its disgusting features.

In her entry to the *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotion*, Heinemää surveys various approaches to disgust, but her focus on Kolnai's conception enables her to assert that disgust is in fact *adverbial*; a term that she borrows from Robert Audi's *Means, Ends, and Persons: The Meaning and Psychological Dimensions of Kant's Humanity Formula*. Heinemää interprets *adverbiality* to mean "being focused on the manner in which an action is performed rather than on the intentions, goals or motivations of the action" (Heinemää 2020: 388).

In line with others, Heinemää depicts the aesthetic capacity of disgust, while also providing a structurally coherent view by connecting the *objective* elements of disgust, i.e., life-death, with its *subjective*, i.e., ambivalent, experience:

We have seen that on the objective side of the experienced phenomenon, life and death penetrate one another in disturbing proportions. On the subjective side, the experience is corre-

spondingly characterized by an ambivalence: disgust alternates between repulsion and attraction and is able to combine instantaneous, even violent rejection with persisting fascination. (Heinemää 2020: 385)

Heinemää sheds new light not only on Kolnai's treatment, but on the phenomenology of disgust itself by injecting it with a dynamic, temporal character as she further builds her argument for *adverbiality* through creating a specific reading of Kolnai:

[...] what is crucial to disgust is the manner of the movement or behavior witnessed (cf. Kolnai 1998, 102). [...] it has an intricate and dynamic gestalt structure, a characteristic organization with a focal center and non-thematic margins, as well as internal and external horizons, and it is associated with other percepts by isomorphism (cf. Kolnai 1929, 29–30, 47, 80). (Heinemää 2020: 386)

Heinemää sharply analyzes difficult passages from Kolnai, and develops an original interpretation of disgust insofar as it relies on our capacity to perceive its dynamic, temporal content. By emphasizing the aesthetic moment of disgust, she forms a supplementary, if even somewhat contradictory, conception to Kolnai's account of disgust<sup>1</sup>.

Most scholars enable us to understand in considerable detail *how* we are disgusted, but they are met by some difficulty in accounting for exactly *why*. Evidently, disgust is a more complicated phenomenon and cannot be defined by its aesthetic capacity alone. Disgust is also a defense reaction against something that wants to touch us without our permission, that accosts us. The secondary intention is essential for understanding not only *how*, but also *why* we experience disgust.

## The Challenge of Disgust

As Kolnai understood it, the initial *challenge* of explaining disgust was traceable to the following: properly accounting for the ambivalent character of disgust, identifying the foundational elements of disgust, and forming a unitary understanding of the phenomena. But, he could only address these matters after having conducted a thorough presentation of two senses of disgust. First, he presents a formal sense of disgust that covers the initial moment of disgust and its character, which relies on phenomenologically presenting disgust's intentional content, objects, and relationship with other emotions. And second, he describes the material side of disgust that deals with its foundational elements of disgust

<sup>1</sup> Heinemää returns to an old "problem" of Kolnai, namely, the question of the unity between physical and moral disgust. If physical disgust is so visceral, what about disgust of a more cognitive nature; do they correspond to the same essence? Heinemää responds to this question with two additional arguments. First, she emphasizes the perceptual, dynamic character of disgust found within its intentional content (Heinemää 2020: 386) and on the basis of which, second, she further implies that disgust is elicited by perceiving this specific manner (Heinemää 2020: 386). Ultimately, Heinemää concludes, somewhat counter to Kolnai, that moral disgust acquires an *adverbial* character.

Kolnai's effort to marry the physical and moral senses of disgust are different in nature, and although it would be correct to say that disgust is foregrounded by a clear perception of a disgust-elicitor, a certain moment of cognition must be present as well.

and shapes its formal aspects. In his analysis, Kolnai does not strictly separate these two senses as in, for instance, when covering the formal sense of disgust, he makes important references to its material sense as well. At times, these cross-references might seem out of place and even misleading, but they serve as points of reference for trying to solve the *challenge* of disgust overall.

There is yet another *challenge* – a side quest if you will – which pertains to the foundation of disgust itself. Kolnai’s stance towards this issue is confusing. Throughout his essay *On Disgust*, he consistently repeats that the emotion comes about by the secondary intention, and that there is a clear, existential element of disgust<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps even unbeknownst to him, Kolnai formulates another paradox – namely, that an emotion that is elicited through a secondary intention and which serves as a defense reaction, focuses primarily not on the subject, but on the object. In fact, this directedness of disgust is so strong that it forms its character and misleads many scholars. The formal features of disgust, then, detach from their foundational elements such that they become entirely unrecognizable. This is somewhat puzzling and rarely addressed in the secondary literature.

## The Formal Sense of Disgust

The first two parts of Kolnai’s essay *On Disgust* are mostly dedicated to expanding and explaining disgust by determining its formal sense, delimiting it, and defining it as a defense reaction. Therein, he compares and juxtaposes disgust to other modes of aversion (such as fear and anxiety) regarding intensity, object type, direction of intention, and the like. Three main features of the intentional content of disgust are important for solving the first *challenge*, and constitute its formal sense: 1) directedness to the features of the object, 2) ambivalence, 3) proximity.

### *The Aesthetic Capacity of Disgust, Proximity, and Ambivalence*

As many have noted, the aesthetic capacity of disgust is based on the directedness of one’s intention to the features of the disgusting object (Kolnai 2004: 40). There is a quality, as Kolnai states, of “pictorial fullness” of the object that belongs to the character of disgust (Kolnai 2004: 40), but which is not limited to it: “the tip of the intention penetrates the object, probing and analyzing it, as it were, and becoming immersed in its motions or in its presence” (Kolnai 2004: 39).

Proximity is a necessary condition of every reaction of disgust that, to rephrase Kolnai, shifts our being to the sphere of disgust (cf. Kolnai 2004: 76). If the conditions of substantial proximity are met, then the subject and the object are *allocated* the same small space:

<sup>2</sup> However, when he rephrases his ideas on emotions in *The Standard Modes of Aversion: Fear, Disgust and Hatred* (written in 1973 and published in 1998), he drops this thesis altogether.

The location of the subject and the disgust-arousing object merge together, as it were, to constitute what might, somewhat rudely, be called a harmonious unity. (Kolnai 2004: 40–41)

Initially, Kolnai emphasizes that disgust is determined as a defense reaction against the proximity, namely, by the allure, of the disgusting object, or its “will to be near” (Kolnai 2004: 41). In this sense, proximity encapsulates the inability of the object to contain itself, thereby facilitating the corresponding uneasiness of the subject. Hence, a defense reaction against the *closeness* of the object manifests, defining the overall disgust reaction by way of a moment of ambivalence: the object invites the subject to be concerned with it, but the subject resists.

Kolnai states that it is a matter of repressing the “inner logic of a possibility of a positive laying hold of the object” (Kolnai 2004: 43), but he does little to further his argumentation towards the foundational elements of disgust here. Instead, in the first parts of the essay, he follows a line of argumentation through which he describes disgust in terms of an affect: “disgust normally arises completely unequivocally as the only possible direct reaction to the object in question” (Kolnai 2004: 41). Here, Kolnai tries to imagine what a naturalistic approach to disgust would entail.

By presenting some of the physical aspects of the disgust-reaction, Kolnai presents a stronger case for ambivalence. This relates, at least in part, to our ability to consume the disgusting object. Kolnai makes a point about our initially being attracted to the disgusting object and then repulsed, based on our physical reaction to eating spoiled food (i.e. vomiting) (Kolnai 2004: 43). Since he implied earlier that the range of the objects that can disgust are “never related to inorganic or non-biological matter” (Kolnai 2004: 30), he concludes that human beings are always susceptible to consuming that which is related to the organic.

Crucially, at this stage, he describes ambivalence as the interplay between attraction and its repression, rather than repulsion. The moment of defending against the allure of the disgusting object becomes less pronounced, and he limits himself to the idea that the object of disgust should never be taken hold of, or that there is enough evidence to prove a clear reaction of repulsion against the disgusting object (Kolnai 2004: 42–43). Kolnai here is not interested in further developing an argument about the dangers of consuming a disgusting object, but rather singles out attraction and the intrusion of the disgusting object, leaving him to only hint at the possible specificity of the threat of the disgusting object.

Kolnai concludes by saying that “ambivalence is characteristic of only one side of disgust” (Kolnai 2004: 43), bringing him to the *challenge* of disgust. For him, this challenge encompasses the presentation of the foundational elements of disgust and aligning them with the moment of ambivalence. Only then can he circle back to the formal sense of disgust and properly account for the paradoxical, ambivalent, and, as we will see, asymmetrical sides of disgust – attraction and repulsion. For now, the most we can say is that the subject shifts into the sphere of the disgusting, not yet into that of death.

## *Secondary Intention*

Under what circumstance does the subject find himself in the sphere of the disgusting? Throughout the text, Kolnai explicitly claims that the core feature of disgust is the experience of the features of the disgusting object (cf. Kolnai 2004: 44). Disgust appears aesthetic in nature, at least initially, but Kolnai later supplements this thought by stating that “[...] disgust can likewise be directed only secondarily towards oneself, towards one’s own make-up” (Kolnai 2004: 46).

On one hand, the intention is directed towards the features of the object, but on the other hand, it relates back to the subject’s existential situation, even if secondarily. Is the intention of disgust in conflict with...itself? Before embarking upon his analysis of the relation of disgust to being and so-being, Kolnai ends the previous section in the following way:

[...] although disgust is triggered as a defense against the object, its subject yet finds himself turning towards the reality which is that object, not towards the existential complex which is his own deliverance. (Kolnai 2004: 44)

We now arrive at the second paradox of disgust. Kolnai forms a genuinely original insight that helps us to better understand the specific nature of disgust and his own interest in this unique emotion (Kolnai 2004: 29). The specific “attack” of disgust forces the subject to react with a defense mechanism against the offensive object, against its inability to be self-contained, but the initial concern for one’s safety fails to adhere and fades into background. The disturbance is so specific, but also so weak that the subject can only remain concerned with the features of that object in question. It is as if disgust holds the subject under a spell. Thereby, disgust seems to incorporate disparate intentions. As Kolnai clarifies:

In the case of disgust, too, there lies at bottom a general intention towards existence; only on the strength of such an intention can disgust come about at all, because disturbance presupposes the intention of one’s own existence. (Only this intention is not primary nor, in a formative sense, decisive as it is in cases of fear.) (Kolnai 2004: 46)

Were it not for the initial “attack” on the subject, there would be nothing to defend against and disgust would not become a defense reaction. From a safe proximity, the same object could elicit a purely aesthetical reaction, even if viscerally strong, that might even be pleasant<sup>3</sup>. There is something peculiar, even mischievous about the disgusting object, its state of being, and its features by which it summons the power to elicit disgust as an emotion. Paradoxically, the very features that trigger disgust – defense against something that is *too close* – transforms into a penetrating gaze of the features of that object.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of such a thought experiment would be David Cronenberg’s recent motion picture *Crimes of the Future* (2022).



The role of the two intentions, then, is as follows. The first one affords disgust with its specific character, while the second enables it. That which appears to be subordinate has, in fact, a grounding value. Disgust draws an aesthetic capacity towards the features of the disgusting object based on a weak relation to the subject's existential situation.

## **The Material Sense of Disgust**

In the third part of his essay, Kolnai provides a short presentation of disgust and how it relates to the senses, as well as a taxonomy of disgusting objects. To name a few, disgusting physical objects could be anything from putrefying, to excrement, secreta, and so on. Moral objects of disgust include things like corruption, moral softness, and the like. Kolnai dedicates one subsection of the third part, "The Relation of Disgust to Life and Death", to defining foundational elements of disgust. Based on his analysis of disgusting objects, he claims that the surplus of life (*das Lebensplus*) and the intention towards death (*die Todesintention*) are an intrinsic part of all disgusting objects and serve as disgust-motifs within the formal sense of disgust.

### ***The Surplus of Life***

The surplus of life refers to an "accentuation, exaggerated representation, swollen overloadedness" (Kolnai 2004: 72). To illustrate his point, Kolnai draws on a certain "metaphysical reality" wherein "the contrast between redundant oscillation of life and life which is structured by purpose is itself a metaphysical datum" (Kolnai 2004: 72). "Metaphysical reality" signifies a perspective of reality that encapsulates two concurring worldviews: one is a redundant, purposeless, emotion driven life-project, while the other is rational and structured. Therefore, it is not, as O'Shiel would have it (O'Shiel 2015: 26), an envelope that combines a surplus of life *and* the intention towards death, but rather, an illustration of a more intellectual take on the disgust-motif of the surplus of life. As Kolnai aptly notes, though, in most cases, the surplus of life appears in lower life forms (Kolnai 2004: 73): swarms of maggots and the like. Nevertheless, he aims to show that to some degree, this element is present in all objects of disgust.

As before, Kolnai argues that attraction towards the surplus of life manifests in a similar fashion between the disgusting object and consumables, as both are made up of organic matter (Kolnai 2004: 77). But in disgust, the indications of spoil offset the initial attraction and evince a detrimental element, as that, which should not be taken hold of (Kolnai 2004: 74).

Attraction is not, as one would imagine, a "benevolent" feeling; it is not positive, not without consequence, and certainly not proportional in the sense that the subject is first attracted and then repulsed. Rather, the disgusting object hits the subject with everything, all at once. In the presence of the disgusting object, one viscerally apprehends it through the senses of smell, sight, touch, and hearing. The constitution of the object does not exude positivity; it is enchanting, but so as to be enticingly repulsive.

Again, it appears as though the aesthetic capacity of disgust along with our natural predisposition towards organic matter forms the specific directedness of the intention towards the features of the disgusting object. This enables our attraction towards those elements of the disgusting object that signify liveliness, usefulness, and a surplus of life. However, instead of focusing more on attraction, as Kolnai did in presenting the formal features of disgust, here he quickly turns to the moment of repulsion. The intention towards death is brought about together with the end of the *naïveté* of the surplus of life. But they work in tandem: in the shadow of liveliness hovers the grim face of death.

### ***The Intention Towards Death***

The deathly element of disgust is pronounced by those elements that signify disintegration, decomposition, disorganization, degeneration, and the like. Several key characteristics define it. The intention towards death does not signify death as such, but an inevitable movement towards death (Kolnai 2004: 75). The disgusting object is not overtaken by death, as it is not inanimate. However, together with its specific liveliness, the object of disgust conveys the potentiality of death.

Repulsion is founded upon the subject's rejection of deathly elements. While the primary intention of disgust is directed to the features of the disgusting object and apprehends the quality of disgustingness within it, the secondary intention relates the subject's own existence with the deathly matter via the disclosure of their similar organic composition.

Qualitative affinity gives way to a realization about decay and implies the possibility of transfer, infection, and contagion. Hence, closer contact and a greater degree of immersion determines the intensity of disgust and results in the urge to place distance between oneself and the object. However, fear of death from infection is not the source of the subject's being penetrated by the feeling of disgust. Rather, affinity with the deathly only reminds the subject of his own susceptibility to decay:

The disgusting object does not hold before our eyes an hourglass but a distorting-mirror; it shows us not a skull in its dry eternity but rather precisely what no longer attaches to the skull and is still a matter of fluid decay. (Kolnai 2004: 78)

But, as the bewitched subject fixates on the disgusting object, his concern for himself becomes secondary. Disgust can only evoke feelings like care for oneself, a need for greater distance, or a desire to reach a more comfortable, cleaner space. Disgust can only affect the subject peripherally, but not paralyzed.

This recognition of common affinity also helps to understand the *macabre allure* of the surplus of life. It attracts one's attention, and expresses usefulness and utility, but equally a liveliness that is imbued with lifelessness. The secret of disgust is that the elements of life and death always appear together so as to confuse the subject. There is no primacy regarding which appears first, but death always "wins". Their unlikely fusion spawns confusion – continuous interplay between enticement and disenchantment, without order (Kolnai 2004: 74). In this sense, disgust is mischievous.

Crucially, the ambivalence of disgust appears to be asymmetrical. Regarding the material sense of disgust, repulsion is founded upon our reaction towards the intention towards death, while attraction is founded upon the functional aspects of the subject. Kolnai constantly emphasizes that these foundational elements together with the secondary intention are only found in theorizing disgust, specifically, in trying to identify its material sense. The foreground of disgust appears to want nothing to do with these foundational elements. The question is, then, whether the distance between the foundational elements of disgust and their manifestation can be bridged or if the gap between them is simply too wide.

## Unity of Disgust

At this point, one might wonder: was disgust ever *really* divided? Was our theoretical reflection so powerful as to cause a rift in the space-time continuum? And, did someone forget to send us a memo about it? Structurally, Kolnai separates disgust into two layers: a formal and a material, as the founded and the foundation, respectively. But, this separation is really driven by Kolnai's intellectual investment in the idea that the ambivalence at the heart of disgust is not a simple matter of attraction and repulsion (Kolnai 2004: 29). This guiding hypothesis is one of the building blocks of his analysis. However, by following this line of thought, at least one thing becomes rather unclear.

If the answer to the *challenge* disgust poses is to discern the unity of the phenomena, then the *challenge* necessarily involves relating the formal and the foundational senses of disgust. Therefore, Kolnai must bridge this gap by accounting for different degrees of expression of ambivalence, while nevertheless affirming its qualitative identity. By pursuing to solve his *challenge*, Kolnai takes great pains to be as thorough as possible. Even so, he crams his answer into a dense couple of pages, resulting in difficult passages that are a constant source of misinterpretation (cf. Kolnai 2004: 76–80)<sup>4</sup>.

## Kolnai's Argument

At the end of the third part of his essay, Kolnai claims to have proven at least two things. First, he affirms his hypothesis regarding the unity of disgust (this also includes an answer to the *challenge* of disgust as it unites the formal and material senses of disgust and ambivalence) (Kolnai 2004: 80). And second, he explains that disgust at physical and moral objects is the same (Kolnai 2004: 80). Evidently, the present work is concerned with the first conclusion and the steps that he takes to achieve this goal.

First and foremost, Kolnai unifies two different senses of ambivalence. He claims (cf. Kolnai 2004: 76–77) that the ambivalent character of the formal sense of disgust is *grounded* in foundational elements of the surplus of life as well as the repulsion towards

<sup>4</sup> The editors of the English version did not retain the sub-sections of the third part. In the German edition (cf. Kolnai 2007: 52), the editors included a clear demarcation of the beginning of a third section dedicated to addressing the *challenge* of how ambivalence is formed and why we should consider disgust as unitary. In the English translation, the section should start at “The challenge that emanates from what is disgusting ...” (Kolnai 2004: 76).

that which bears an affinity with the deathly. *Immediate, concentrated* (Kolnai 2004: 79) apprehension of these foundational elements of life and death translates into a *macabre allure* and the repression of that *alure*.

Kolnai then turns to the grounding value of the secondary intention of disgust in order to further support his claim. The secondary intention relates the subject to the signification of the deathly by facilitating a recognition of affinity with it. Essentially, the safety mechanism of disgust is founded as the reaction against further immersion in this affinity (i.e. the subject's susceptibility to decay, as Kolnai emphasizes repeatedly).

But within the immediacy of the situation, the secondary intention, together with the intention towards death and surplus of life are removed to an almost unrecognizable degree as a "disavowed relation to the essential features of the matter" (Kolnai 2004: 77). The fundamental, existential, element does not come to the fore. But could it? Kolnai is reluctant to explain the matter.

Evidently, the foreground of disgust leaves little room to incorporate any notion of disgust-motifs. Kolnai's solution is to state that ambivalence in the formal sense of disgust is a *concentrated* expression of those disgust-motifs. But, this idea can only be understood from a certain point of view – namely, substantial proximity. He defines the situation as follows:

[...] this substantial proximity which touches the *general* properties of our being and at the same time represents in a concentrated manner the specific features of the object giving rise to disgust. (Kolnai 2004: 79)

Kolnai defines substantial proximity as "sensual perceivability, as palpability, as the closeness of functional relation, traffic, communion with the object" (Kolnai 2004: 78). For him, substantial proximity encapsulates the full significance of disgust (cf. Kolnai 2004: 78–79). But, the term is somewhat misleading, as it denotes the apprehension of the fullness of the experience of disgust, not only its formal or material sense, or likewise some other beforehand analyzed aspect of disgust or a simple closeness to the subject. Kolnai even states that it is a "metaphysical surrounding" (Kolnai 2004: 78).

The full significance of the experience of disgust, then, implies the understanding that life and death are signified in disgust in a *concentrated* manner and manifest in the emotion as such only partially, as attraction and repression without an immediate reference to its core (Kolnai 2004: 79).

Perhaps, it would not be so far from the truth to suggest that when Kolnai refers to the *concentrated* manner of disgust, he does not mean some kind of truncated, shortened, theoretically abstracted version of the mixture of lifelessness and liveliness, but rather, an immediate reaction to them. In a similar context, he claims that the: "intention towards death, too, is something that strikes the disgusted subject immediately" (Kolnai 2004: 77). This is of secondary importance to Kolnai.

We slowly begin to realize, then, that substantial proximity is not a new category, but one that allows Kolnai to rephrase what has already been said in a different, and maybe even more confusing, light. The long-awaited and long-anticipated answer to

the *challenge* of disgust, the unification of its two seemingly disparate parts, has come unexpectedly.

## Conclusion

Kolnai's analysis identifies and addresses the paradox of ambiguity and how it relates to the unitary nature of the phenomenon of disgust. An incompleteness of the formal sense of disgust warrants a more originary sense of the matter. There is a certain hermeneutical movement of circularity regarding Kolnai's argumentation. Elements of the formal sense of disgust (attraction, repulsion, secondary intention, proximity) are mirrored in material sense, as foundational elements.

The key to Kolnai's essay lies in identifying and separating two doubles within the structure of disgust. The first double is the *modus operandi* of disgust — ambivalence. The initial ambivalence is grounded within the attraction and repulsion of the surplus of life and the intention towards death.

The second one is the doubling of the intention itself. The initial intention constitutes the character of disgust and is directed toward the features of the disgusting object. Simultaneously, however, it is also directed towards the subject, if faintly. If one overlooks the importance of the secondary intention, it will necessarily lead to focusing on its aesthetical capacity and inability to account for *why* we are repulsed. But, this is a rather thin thread to follow since the secondary intention is so detached from its counterpart. Nevertheless, it is only because of the secondary intention that disgust has a foundation at all. It directs the subject to the thrum of an unwanted stranger that reminds him of his own susceptibility to decay. But in this sense, disgust is truly mischievous, since it pulls away the intention from the subject, towards the stranger, as if there was something important that he had to say.

To the extent that the intention towards death grounds repulsion and the surplus of life – attraction, ambivalence is asymmetrical. Based on this insight, Kolnai can claim that disgust has no opposite (for instance, appetite or attraction). Disgust is unique.

Kolnai's approach to ambivalence also dispenses with a naturalistic approach to disgust. By being sensitive to the full significance of the experience of disgust and its meaning as a defense reaction, Kolnai can account for the transformation of its foundational elements.

Disgust discreetly begins with an invisible upheaval, but ends with fascination and repulsion in order to help us deal with a “trauma” of our being *being* accosted. Disgust, not only as an emotion, but as a phenomenon, attests to the tragedy of our existential situation, to our susceptibility to be affected by objects and the need to respond, save ourselves, not only our body, but also our soul, so that a certain fundamental part of our being would not be, in this case, infected:

Whereas the act of negation – already ‘dialectical’ in its nascent state – has to ‘justify’ itself, even in its most general form, by expressing especially the kind of damage which the subject has suffered. (Kolnai 2004: 36)

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