

## *Kant on Educating for Disgust: An Aesthetic and Ethical Tool for Humanity*

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*This paper explores the role of disgust education in Kant, considering its aesthetic and moral implications. Kant distinguishes between physical education, shared with animals, and moral education, which is essential for living according to freedom. Disgust, according to Kant, functions as a defense mechanism against one's animality and impulses that hinder human elevation, representing resistance to bodily drives and moral vices. I propose a taxonomy of disgust, differentiating between physical disgust related to the senses and cultural, as well as moral disgust associated with repulsion towards vice and evil. In anthropological context, disgust is connected to notions of boredom, monotony, and sensory saturation – elements that impede moral vitality. Kant views aesthetic education as a means to perfect humanity, fostering a civilization that moves away from natural brutality. In conclusion, I argue that disgust, far from being an antisocial emotion, serves as a valuable pedagogical and cultural tool in the process of human civilization and refinement, by linking empirical feelings, aesthetics, and morality.*

**Keywords:** Disgust; negative aesthetics; boredom; aesthetic education, anthropology.

In his *Pedagogy*, Kant writes that education for disgust is one of the highest educational goals. Kant distinguishes between physical education, which is shared with animals, and moral education, which is necessary to live according to freedom. In accordance with this distinction, it is possible to distinguish between purely physiological disgust, which we share in part with animals, and moral disgust, which is cultural and distinctive to humanity. Here, I will focus on the latter type of disgust.

Disgust, as described by Kant, then serves as a defense mechanism against one's own animality and against that which prevents elevation

to humanity. Thus, disgust becomes a form of opposition to one's own animality.

In this article I will consider the empirical dimension of disgust and, therefore, leave out the passage Kant devotes to disgust in the *Critique of Judgment* and the thematization of aesthetic disgust, although I believe there are several points of connection. I will first present a taxonomy of disgust in anthropological writings, then I will explore its relationship with empirical morality and aesthetic education, respectively. This line of argument will allow me to show an empirical aspect of Kantian morality that is usually ignored and to highlight its connection with feelings and aesthetics. This perspective fits into a broader framework that considers negative emotions and their effects on transcendental philosophy, which I call 'Kant's negative aesthetics'<sup>1</sup>.

### *1. Habit and boredom: Disgust and repugnance in anthropology*

Not only in *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, but also in *Lectures on Anthropology* disgust appears several times, according to different meanings, to the point that one could consider a kind of Kantian taxonomy of disgust, repugnance and aversion. What we see in anthropology is a gradual shift from the conception of aesthetic disgust (*Ekel*), as an impediment to representational capacity, to the consideration of moral repugnance (*Abscheu*) as a reaction to vice and evil.

What remains constant is the definition of disgust as a reaction to something that "imposes itself on us," which is opposed to freedom, but the real originality of Kantian anthropological treatment is the vitalistic orientation of its analysis: disgust, in fact, is always an impediment to the functioning of a faculty, which has as its effect an impediment of vital forces.

As in the *Critique of Judgment*, disgust indicates an enjoyment that is imposed on us, an object that demands our representation and yet finds no form in the activity of the imagination. Not only in art but, for example, "The sight of others enjoying loathsome things (e.g., when the Tungusc rhythmically suck out and swallow the mucus from their children's noses) induces the spectator to vomit, just as if such a pleasure were forced upon him" (Anth 178).

In *Anthropologie Parow* (Winter 1772/1773), the definition of disgust as a form of saturation is clear and, as already for Moses Mendelssohn, beauty that is too pure turns into a source of disgust (V-Anth/Parow 388). Thus disgust is first and foremost a form of nausea with monotony and repetition, which "brings our life to a certain halt" (V-Anth/Pillau 792). In this sense, Kant distinguishes between a physical disgust and an ideal disgust (*ibid.*): the former depends solely on the senses and is experienced in the face of a real object; the latter is moral

<sup>1</sup> For a better explanation see Feloj 2024.

in nature, is a form of inhibition of desire and has to do with representation (V-Anth/Mrongovius 1349).

Habit is, in fact, for Kant something that generates nausea and disgust: "The reason why the habits of another stimulate the arousal of disgust in us is that here the animal in the human being jumps out far too much, and that here one is led instinctively by the rule of habitation, exactly like another (non-human) nature, and so runs the risk of falling into one and the same class with the beast" (Anth 149). Habit, that is, a form of habituation that leads one to process sense material in a mechanical and unconscious way, is for Kant something "reprehensible," contrary to human life itself. Monotony, that is a "complete uniformity," "ultimately causes atony (lack of attention to one's condition), and the sense impressions grow weak" (Anth 164). For Kant, habit is, in a profoundly Enlightenment sense, a renunciation of the critical spirit and a promotion of the monotony that saturates and breeds nausea. The senses of enjoyment are certainly the most exposed to this kind of habituation, so much so that disgust comes to signify a form of defense against that which generates nausea in us; it is a form of liberation against that which threatens our life force.

In this sense, disgust is "a very strong vital sensation," which in a natural way immediately turns us away from the enjoyment that is imposed on us. Nausea (*Ekel*) is for Kant "an impulse to free oneself of food through the shortest way out of the esophagus (to vomit), has been allotted to the human being as such a strong vital sensation, for this intimate taking in can be dangerous to the animal" (Anth 157-8).

This last passage is particularly significant for my discussion of disgust in the anthropological context in that Kant reveals not only all his vitalistic interest, but more importantly he admits that he conceives of disgust as a means of defense against objects that pose a threat to our sensory life and our moral freedom. Again, on this occasion Kant reveals how much, in anthropology, he considers man as a whole, where the relationship between body and spirit is as close as ever. Indeed, sensory enjoyment is understood in analogy with spiritual enjoyment, "which consists in the communication of thoughts" (Anth 157).

The theme of disgust, between habit, sensory enjoyment and spiritual enjoyment, thus meets the theme of boredom, a form of monotony that prevents the vitality necessary for moral action. Vitality is understood primarily as the movement of faculties that forms the basis for judgement. In the moral sphere, vitality also connotes the drive to action and condemns inaction, in accordance with the spirit of the Enlightenment. In this sense, vitality and morality are deeply connected.

Boredom is for Kant first and foremost the "disgust with one's own existence, which arises when the mind is empty of the sensations toward which it incessantly strives. This is boredom [...] a highly contrary feeling whose cause is none other than the natural inclination toward ease" (Anth 151-152). Boredom is both a form of saturation

and an emptiness: it affects a subject, generally educated and cultured, who, now satiated, finds no sensation that can stimulate his desire, his imagination is stalled, and his life force is ill-emphasized. Boredom, just like disgust, arises as a state of utmost displeasure due, however, to the absence not only of pleasures but also of pains that can stimulate the soul: “Finally, even if no positive pain stimulates us to activity, if necessary a negative one, boredom, will often affect us in such a manner that we feel driven to do something harmful to ourselves rather than nothing at all. For boredom is perceived as a void of sensation by the human being” (Anth 232–233).

The boredom that afflicts the cultivated man also has a moral value in anthropology, since, as Susan Shell points out, natural vitalism finds a parallel in moral vitalism and the principle of life refers back to the principle of freedom (Shell 2014: 152). The notion of boredom that afflicts cultured individuals also has moral value from an anthropological point of view, since, as Susan Shell observes (2014), natural vitalism — the idea that human existence is conditioned by vital impulses, sensibilities, inclinations and affections — finds a parallel in moral vitalism: the principle of life is not confined to the physiological or natural plane, but extends to the ethical plane, forcing the individual to reflect on how natural inclinations should be governed, disciplined or integrated into a life in accordance with freedom. In particular, Shell argues that in *Anthropologie Friedländer* Kant defends a pragmatic anthropology in which he seeks to reconcile life (sensitivity, inclination, nature) with the “higher” principles of moral and practical activity, showing that freedom is a principle that can guide concrete life, sensory experience and moral action. However, Shell notes that this reconciliation is to some extent provisional: as Kantian thought progresses, the distinction between reason (morality) and nature becomes more marked, and Kant seems to abandon certain forms of natural vitalism in favour of a conception of moral spontaneity that makes less use of the original unity of life and activity present in his early anthropological writings.

The *Anthropologie Friedländer*, to which Shell’s essay is dedicated, points out that Kant uses the two terms *Ekel* and *Abscheu* to denote the more bodily and the more moral dimensions of disgust, but in both cases it is a matter of naming that among the sources of displeasure which has no equal and which is a reaction to making one’s life hateful. From the perspective of *Anthropologie Friedländer*’s vitalism, disgust signals an impediment to life and is therefore contrary to any possibility of pleasure: “loathing cannot produce an enjoyment in the least degree, because it is disgust due to the quality of the object; it is in and for itself absolutely a disgust. Agitations of the mind due to loathing suppress all enjoyment; it is the feeling of lifelessness, for the individual is also incapable of [having] other sensations.” (V-Anth/Fried 597).

Vice is, especially in anthropology lectures, the moral correlate of this physiological sensation. Moral vice, in fact, impedes life as much as

physiological disgust, to which moral repugnance is therefore equated (see Frierson 2006).

In a long passage in *Anthropologie Friedländer* Kant articulates the relationship between *Abscheu* and *Ekel* with unique accuracy in his analysis of negative emotions. Here repugnance (*Abscheu*) is given as a prime example of an objective feeling that depends solely on judgment about the object and not on the subject's state of mind, unlike fear, terror, and pain. Repugnance can be a form of nausea and disgust or a form of contempt (*Verachtung*) for moral vice. Disgust, however, must be distinguished from both contempt and hatred, since, as I have already said, it "arrests the source of life," "is a brake on movement," and allows "no increase" (V-Anth/Fried 597). Disgust therefore cannot bring any kind of pleasure because it is a repugnance that concerns only the qualities of the object. What turns out to be disgusting forces us to sink lower and lower into our most bodily and animal dimension, so vices are to be regarded as an obstacle to the life of the spirit and the motions of the soul just as much as a disgusting object can cause a total impediment to the bodily senses and the faculty of knowing (V-Anth/Fried 597–598).

As found in *Anthropologie Parow*, Kant wonders what feelings such as that of pleasure and displeasure (*Abscheu*) can bring us, since, as feelings, they still derive from the body (V-Anth/Parow 397–8). In truth, repugnance, being a feeling that depends solely on the object, can be understood as an inclination that turns away from vice and promotes virtue (see Zammito 2002: 132–133). In the judgment of what is good and what is evil, from an anthropological point of view, desire and repugnance therefore perform the same task and are exactly opposite feelings (*Sentiment*) (V-Anth/Busolt 1513), where, however, repugnance is an immediate reaction, which even in its moral declination retains a bodily dimension.

Thus, in this anthropological context there is a legitimization in the moral sphere of repugnance as a means of defense, as opposed to the total exclusion of disgust from aesthetics.

## 2. *Perfecting man, educating to disgust*

The *Pragmatic Anthropology* of 1798 concludes with a reflection aimed at optimism and fully Enlightenment. Human beings are distinguished by their "moral disposition," thus tending toward the good, although it is also true that experience also shows "a tendency to actively desire what is unlawful, even though he knows that it is unlawful; that is, a tendency to *evil*" (Anth 325). To counteract this tendency to evil, man must give up "his animal tendency may be to give himself over passively to the impulses of ease and good living" (Anth 325), he must give up disgusting boredom, learn to oppose (*widersetzen*) to evil (V-Anth/Mron 157): "The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society

with human beings and in it to *cultivate* himself, to *civilize* himself, and to *moralize* himself by means of the arts and sciences” (Anth 324–325).

For Kant, education is a form of continuous progress, of the species and of the individual, toward one’s destination (*Bestimmung*)<sup>2</sup>, a progress that nevertheless undergoes, because of the animal tendency to evil and the crudeness of our nature, “constant deviations” and “continuous and repeated swerves” (Anth 325).

It is not surprising then that in the *Pedagogy* of 1803 disgust and repugnance are considered as one of the main tasks of education (Munzel 2012). Again, following up on the question that asks whether man is more oriented toward good or evil, Kant recognizes in *Pedagogy* the inevitable ambiguity of the answer: man by nature is neither good nor evil since nature has no moral orientation. He is, however, inclined to pursue the good the moment his reason rises to the concepts of duty and law, even though his natural inclinations and instinct lead him toward vice. “Our own vocation as human beings [*unsre Bestimmung als Menschen*]” (Päd 492) must be accomplished by moving away from the crude state of nature to which we belong as animals: “everything is based on nature” and therefore “Children must learn to substitute detesting things because they are disgusting and absurd for abhorrence out of hatred; they must learn to have inner aversion replace the external aversion to human beings or to divine punishment, to have self-estimation and inner worth replace the opinions of human beings” (Päd 493).

In the *Pedagogy* lectures, disgust and repugnance thus meet the themes of education and *Bestimmung des Menschen*, according to the belief that “the human being can only become human through education” (Päd 443).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Aesthetic education

I have already mentioned that disgust is referred to by Kant in *Pedagogy* as one of the goals of education, and certainly moral aversion is considered a result of the process of civilization that moves away from the condition of animality. Kantian scholars have often overlooked, probably abetted by the Schillerian interpretation, the possibility that Kantian aesthetics could have an empirical treatment and that this went in the direction of education through aesthetic experience.<sup>4</sup> Instead, these elements are found, quite clearly, in what might be called

<sup>2</sup> On the topic of *Bestimmung des Menschen* in Kant, the work of Brandt (2007) is indispensable.

<sup>3</sup> Compare this passage with: V-Anth/Collins 470–471.

<sup>4</sup> There are clearly some exceptions. Significant for my argument is the position of Leah Hochmann, who in her text devoted to the category of the ugly in Mendelssohn dwells on the moral function that art takes on for Kant and notes interesting similarities between Mendelssohn’s and Kant’s treatment in light of a theory of aesthetic education (Hochmann 2014: 61–62).

Kant's "anthropological aesthetics," namely in the passages devoted to art in *Pragmatic Anthropology* and *Lectures*, which can be read in parallel with the paragraphs of the Third Critique devoted to the theory of art and genius.

In contrast to the moral rigorism commonly imputed to him by critics, Kant sees in aesthetics a possibility for the application of morality, which allows both the formality of the law of reason and the need for its actualization in the empirical world. Confirmation that a practical dimension of aesthetics, to be understood as an instrument of human education, is present in Kant is still found in the *Doctrine of Virtue* and *Anthropology*. In the *Introduction* to the *Tugendlehre* we read an oddly clear definition of the notion of perfection: there is a quantitative perfection, which belongs to transcendental philosophy and concerns the totality of the manifold in unity, and there is a qualitative perfection, which belongs to teleology and indicates the agreement of the properties of a thing in view of an end. Qualitative perfection must be set by humanity as the end of its actions according to its own moral destination: for this reason, it is not a gift of nature, but "consist only in *cultivating one's faculties*" (MdS 387).

Disgust, as found described in *Anthropology*, can then be placed in this perspective, and that is to go to constitute a defense mechanism against one's animality, against anything that prevents one from rising to humanity and moving away from natural crudeness. Just as in morality, aversion is directed at the vice that prevents one's liberation from one's inclinations in order to achieve virtue, so in anthropological aesthetics and applied morality,<sup>5</sup> disgust is a form of opposition to one's animality (V-Anth/Mensch 917). The passages Kant devotes to aesthetics in *Anthropology* can thus be read in continuity with the concepts of education (*Erziehung*) and formation (*Bildung*), developed especially in *Pedagogy*. In the last paragraphs of *Anthropology* we read that "The human being must therefore be educated to the good; but he who is to educate him is on the other hand a human being who still lies in the crudity of nature and who is now supposed to bring about what he himself needs. Hence the continuous deviation from his vocation with the always-repeated returns to it" (Anth 325).

Thus, in *Anthropologie Parow* it is found that "there are many teachers who incessantly teach virtue, but who are utterly indifferent even to the sight of it [...]. However, the question arises here: what then can trigger in us the so-called feeling of pleasure and repugnance? [...] all pleasures in man come from the body" (V-Anth/Parow 397).

To speak of aesthetic education in Kant thus means first of all to consider the role of feelings in the applied part of morality, where by feelings we do not mean the moral feeling of respect for the law of reason, which is transcendental in nature, but rather the empirical feel-

<sup>5</sup> Following Loudén's proposal, we could call applied ethics: "impure ethics" (Loudén 2000).

ings that impel one to perform virtue in the concrete actualization of the good. It is in this sense that disgust becomes part of man's education.

In the *Pedagogy*, Kant distinguishes a physical education and a moral education: the former is in common with animals, while the latter, practical or moral education, is that by which man must be trained in order to live according to freedom (Päd 455).

For Kant, in truth, "the human being is the only creature that must be educated" (Päd 441) and his education has as its goal the "liberation of the will from the despotism of desire" (KU 432). In the *Critique of Practical Reason* education is fundamental to man, but it is precisely in the applied part of morality, in which pedagogy as well as anthropology can be included, that Kant conceptually defines the task of education. It is defined by the triad of cultivation, civilization and moralization (*Kultivierung, Zivilisierung und Moralisierung*)<sup>6</sup> and the means to achieve it are basically traced back to art and science: "We are cultivated in a high degree by art and science. We are civilized, perhaps to the point of being overburdened, by all sorts of social decorum and propriety. But very much is still lacking before we can be held to be already moralized" (IaG 26).<sup>7</sup>

In a set of concepts in which *Kultivierung, Zivilisierung, Moralisierung, Bildung* and *Erziehung* are not always strictly distinguished, disgust stands for the highest degree of the process of civilization and turning away from animality, and the concept of art is extended to become the opposite of nature, to mean everything that is not instinctual and feral, but educated and civilized: "Since the development of the natural predispositions in the human being does not take place by itself, all education is – an art" (Päd 447).

In a pragmatic sense, therefore, it is possible to say that Kant certainly elaborates a concept of education in which aesthetic feelings play a non-secondary role, not so much because they constitute a direct exercise for the capacity for judgment for moral purposes<sup>8</sup>, but because the subject finds himself involved in an experience that, while being of a sensitive nature, fosters the refinement of his supersensible faculties and develops a progress, affecting the entire human species, toward civilization. In this sense, disgust, which, in Kant's view, is characteristic of the civilized man, is a defense mechanism and at the same time almost a field test certifying the departure, even from a sensible point of view, from animality.

In conclusion, and in more general terms, with this paper I wanted not only to define disgust as a tool of advocacy in Kantian pedagogy, but I have argued for at least two other ideas: the first, is that Kantian

<sup>6</sup> For contextualizing and explaining the mentioned "triad of culture, civilization and moralization", see Holly 2006; Jacobs-Kain 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Compare this passage with Päd 451; Refl. 1460, AA XV, p. 641.

<sup>8</sup> As has been argued about the sublime (Rohlf 2008).



philosophy is not only the critical philosophy, but also possesses an empirical declension, where I am convinced that Kant's empirical philosophy is to be considered as a complement and not as separate or opposed to the critical philosophy. The second idea I have argued for is that, at least from a Kantian perspective, disgust can take on a useful function in human education and in the process of civilization, as opposed to some contemporary readings<sup>9</sup> that consider disgust a non-inclusive and antisocial emotion.

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[I use the abbreviations indicated by Kant Studien; for the English translation, I referred to The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant]

Anth: *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, AA VII

IaG: *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, AA VIII

KU: *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, AA V

MdS: *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, AA VI

Päd: *Pädagogik*, AA IX

V-Anth/Busolt: Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1788/1789 Busolt, AA XXV

V-Anth/Fried: Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1775/1776 Friedländer, AA XXV

V-Anth/Mensch: Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1781/1782 Menschenkunde, Petersburg, AA XXV

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<sup>9</sup> I am referring above all to Martha Nussbaum's book: *From Disgust to Humanity* (Nussbaum 2010).

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