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Epistemic Disgust

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Abstract

It is not unusual to find the content of an epistemic agent's utterance unwanted and *immediately* reject such an utterance because it elicits a repulsive reaction in us. What could explain this sort of reaction to a speaker's utterance? In this paper, I propose an "epistemic disgust" concept to explain this reaction to a speaker's utterance. Epistemic disgust refers to a phenomenon whereby an epistemic agent is repulsed by a speaker's utterance either due to the speaker's personality or the content of the speaker's utterance, thus causing the agent to reject the speaker's utterance from contributing to her epistemic system.

Keywords: Disgust; hearer; speaker; utterance; repulsion

"From out his mouth's mephitic well . . .
Poured fetid stench and sulphurous flames"

– Tom Taylor, 'How Father Thames Appeared to the Cabinet, On the Road to Whitebait Dinner, and What He Said to Them', *Punch*, July 31, 1858

"To put it crudely, the memory actually stinks just as in the present the object stinks; and in the same manner as we turn away . . . the head and nose . . . in disgust . . . the sense of consciousness turns away from the memory."

– Sigmund Freud in a Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, November 14, 1897

"It is all right if it comes out of my anus as flatus or feces, but it mustn't come out of my mouth as words."

– Susan Isaacs, 'The Nature and Function of Phantasy', 1948

1. Introduction

In Yoruba communicative exchanges, it is not unusual to say “*Òrò ọ̀ọ̀rùn lẹ̀ n sọ*,” which loosely translates to “what you’re saying is smelling.”¹ Note that the word “smelling” is used in Yoruba communicative exchanges to mean something (object, place, or utterance) has a “bad” odor in a way that is to report that one has a sense of disgust towards what (in this case) is being uttered. This colloquial expression doesn’t mean an utterance in fact smells;² rather, it expresses that the hearer finds the speaker’s utterance repulsive.

As we will see, repulsive reactions to a speaker’s utterance are prevalent in everyday communicative exchanges. However, the philosophical literature has neglected what could explain this type of repulsive reaction.³ I take on the challenge of exploring and elaborating on this neglected common phenomenon, and I propose an “epistemic disgust” concept to explain this reaction. My thesis will be that epistemic disgust refers to a phenomenon whereby an epistemic agent is repulsed by a speaker’s utterance, due either to the speaker’s personality or the content of the speaker’s utterance, thus causing the agent to reject the speaker’s utterance from contributing to her epistemic system.⁴

After I briefly explore extant literature on disgust to introduce and elaborate on the nature of disgust in section 2, section 3 follows that account to fashion out my conception of epistemic disgust. In section 4, I identify and describe two central ways of theorizing epistemic disgust: *epistemic disgust as regards the speaker’s utterance* and *epistemic disgust as regards the speaker’s personality*.⁵ In section 5, I respond to worries about whether epistemic disgust is different from related concepts such as moral disgust and deep disagreement. Since on my account, the repulsive reaction we feel towards a speaker’s utterance is an automatic sub-rational response that causes us to *immediately* reject the speaker’s utterance, epistemic disgust *can* be epistemically problematic. In section 6, I investigate considerations that make epistemic disgust epistemically problematic. However, since epistemic disgust could also function as a way of rejecting

¹I refer to the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria.

²Utterances, as we know, cannot possess the properties that physical objects possess for them to have a bad odor.

³To be fair, it is not only philosophical literature that has neglected (epistemic) disgust. Perhaps, we are averse to disgust research because it is “simply” disgusting (Rozin *et al.* 2009: 11). Until recently, disgust was never a popular concept of research interest to scholars. After Charles Darwin’s first inquiry into the origin of emotions in 1867, the concept of disgust itself, as Rozin *et al.*, highlight, did not become a topic of psychological research or teaching until the last decade of the twentieth century; in fact, it was “almost absent” before this (Rozin *et al.* 2009: 10). The first academically focused book on disgust – William Ian Miller’s *The Anatomy of Disgust* – was not published until 1997. Philips *et al.*, call it a “neglected basic emotion” (Philips *et al.* 1998: 373). One explanation could be that, as Joensuu tells us, “Despite how familiar, common, or ordinary disgust experiences can be in daily life, it has remained challenging to address both theoretically and in our personal interpretations of disgust experiences” (Joensuu 2020: 7). In any case, it was not until recently that disgust became the topic of sustained research efforts.

⁴Note that I am not concerned with the epistemic dimension of physical disgust in this paper. Say, for instance, when S says, “This apple is disgusting.” I am not concerned about how S knows that the apple she is seeing is disgusting or what attributes of disgust the apple possesses for S to infer that the apple is disgusting. Further, though I think disgust can influence our epistemic judgments, my primary concern is not with how or whether disgust influences our epistemic judgment. I believe exploring how disgust might influence our epistemic judgments or evaluations is worth exploring. I tackle this question in another paper entitled “Transferred Epistemic Disgust” because the disgust is transferred from the speaker to the utterance. See Odeyemi (In preparation).

⁵Note: I am willing to concede that forms of epistemic disgust could be manifold and invite others to identify other forms.

deeply objectionable utterances that our epistemic system flags as contaminants, epistemic disgust can also be potentially beneficial. I discuss this in section 7.

2. Disgust

In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, the British scientist Charles Darwin kick-started the first inquiry into the emotion of disgust living organisms feel.⁶ Darwin's study of emotions across different races conjectured that some emotions are biologically innate and universally expressed by all human faces including those he deemed the "savage races of man" (Darwin 1867: 7). Disgust is one of these emotions and many studies since then have supported this proposal.⁷

A capsule summary of the theory of disgust that is widely accepted today, according to Strohming (2014), is that it is an emotion that helps organisms avoid contaminants and disease, acting as a behavioral extension of the immune system.⁸ However, scholars disagree on the issue of the development of disgust as a human emotion. Though philosophical, anthropological, and psychological literature don't agree on the matter, they generally differ from Darwinian literature in their views on how the disgust system developed in humans. Some have argued that humans develop a sense of disgust within their culture. For example, Freud (1908) thinks that disgust is a reaction shaped by developmental processes. Philosophers Colin McGinn (2011) and Aurel Kolnai (2004) argue that disgust is an ambiguous expression humans have when they realize the uneasy juxtaposition between life and death.⁹ The prominent psychological theory from Rozin and Haidt argues that disgust is an emotional reaction rooted in the rejection of rotten food. This response later developed to assist in managing the existential fear tied to our animal instincts and the awareness of our mortality. Darwinian thinking, however, states that rather than developing a sense of disgust within their culture, the capacity to feel disgusted is an innate human equipment because it is an emotion that serves as an extension of the behavioral immune systems that are universal in animals and predate the evolution of modern humans (Curtis *et al.*, 2011: 390).

Despite the disagreement on how the disgust system developed, scholars generally agree that the repulsive reaction is universal, and it causes us to reject what we are repulsed by. The literature has paid attention to disgust – its fundamental characteristics (Miller 1997; Philip *et al.*, 1998); living organisms' gape expression when they come in contact with a disgust elicitor (Darwin 1867); as an adaptive system for disease-avoidant behavior (Curtis *et al.*, 2011); as an emotional response to a violation of moral norms (Rozin *et al.*, 2008; Kelly 2011; Kumar 2017; Fileva 2021); and how it arises when humans confront the tension between life and death (McGinn 2011; Kolnai 2004; cf. Sartre 1964) among others. However, not only physical objects and people flaunting

⁶Darwin's book is a product of a questionnaire "Queries about Expression" he sent out to a group of scientists and acquaintances around the world he could contact. For a copy of Darwin's questionnaire, see "Introduction: Of Origin and Orifices" in Zachery's (2021: 3) *The Masses are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Political Aesthetics of Disgust*.

⁷For example, see Brown (1991); Ekman and Friesen (1971); Curtis and Biran (2001); Curtis *et al.* (2011); and Curtis (2007). For example, Curtis *et al.* (2011) note that the study of rats and other mammals after eating noxious food has shown that they express gape expression (an expression first identified by Darwin). Because of this, Curtis *et al.* (2011) suggest that disgust may be at least a pan-mammalian adaptation.

⁸See Curtis *et al.* (2011); Oaten *et al.* (2009); Rozin and Fallon (1987); Schaller and Park (2011).

⁹Cf. Sartre (1964). Strohming (2014) wrote a scarring review of McGinn's (2011) book. In her review, Strohming refers to McGinn's philosophical theory of disgust as "bullshit" and says that "Sometimes with ideas, as with farts, it's better to just hold it in" (Strohming 2014: 215). See McGinn (2015) for a response.

immoral acts elicit a repulsive reaction in us – the subjects the literature on disgust has paid attention to. We are sometimes repulsed by a person's utterance and block it from contributing to our epistemic system because we want our epistemic system to remain free of contamination.

Though this topic is neglected, the expression of disgust at a person's utterance is an everyday occurrence. For example, it is not unusual to come across comments on social media and news media that highlight that a hearer finds a speaker's utterance disgusting. A telling example is when the 47th US-elected President Donald Trump questioned the racial identity of former Vice President Kamala Harris – who is both Black and South Asian – when the former asked “Is she Indian or is she Black?”. Trump claimed that Harris – who has long identified as Black and attended a historically Black university – used to identify as Indian and then “all of a sudden, she made a turn, and she became a Black person.” Responding to Trump's comments, then White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre called Donald Trump's comments “repulsive”.¹⁰ Another telling example of the expression of disgust at a person's utterance is the response of a woman on X (formerly Twitter) to a snippet of an interview the 47th US-elected Vice President JD Vance had with Fox News. In the interview, JD Vance says people like Harris are “childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives” and have “no direct stake” in America.¹¹ Shortly after seeing that interview, Corie Whalen, a self-proclaimed right-leaning woman, quoted Vance and wrote I “agree with almost nothing the Biden-Harris administration has done, but the primal hatred and disgust Vance (‘s utterance) stokes in me transcends politics.”¹² A common feature of these two examples is the rejection of the speakers' utterances as if the hearers want to avoid contamination of their epistemic system.¹³ I call these sorts of expressions of disgust at a speaker's utterance “epistemic disgust”, and this is what I turn to for the rest of this paper.

3. Epistemic disgust

We have epistemic aversions. Sometimes we *immediately* reject the content of a speaker's utterance from contributing to what the economist Roger Koppl terms our “epistemic system” because of the repulsive reaction the speaker's utterance elicits in us. Epistemic systems are developed through “social processes generating judgments of truth and falsity” (Koppl 2006: 1) for the relevant epistemic agent. If “epistemic” refers to “of or relating to knowledge or degree of acceptance”,¹⁴ then “epistemic systems” are “epistemic” because as epistemic agents we are embedded in “whether they tend to produce reliable knowledge” (ibid: 1). Importantly, also, they are “systems” because epistemic pieces form “a connected or complex whole;” the elements are “connected . . . so as to form a complex unity.”¹⁵ In his characterization of “veritistic social epistemology”, Goldman notes that “Epistemic systems are social processes viewed

¹⁰See <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/31/us/politics/trump-kamala-harris-black-nabj.html> (Accessed 8/2/24).

¹¹For the snippet of the interview JD Vance had with Fox News, see Filipkowski's (2024) tweet on X. https://x.com/ronfilipkowski/status/1815503440983867598?s=46&t=Bjj71GNJ_ajeLpvN657ETA (Accessed 7/23/24).

¹²For Corie Whalen's (2024) response to Vance's comment about Kamala Harris, see https://x.com/corie_whelen/status/1815588166658822583?s=46&t=Bjj71GNJ_ajeLpvN657ETA. (Accessed 7/23/24) Bracket not in original.

¹³Compare: Disgusting objects are disgusting because they can contaminate our system. We avoid a disgusting apple because it will contaminate our nutritional and immune systems and make us sick.

¹⁴See Oxford English Dictionary. Quoted in Koppl (2006).

¹⁵See Oxford English Dictionary. Quoted in Koppl (2006).

from the perspective of their tendency to help or frustrate the production of true judgments” (Goldman 1999; quoted in Koppl 2006: 1).¹⁶

Sometimes, because an utterance elicits a repulsive reaction in us, we don’t want such utterance to contribute to the epistemic system we rely on in making sense of the world. Cases when we are repulsed by a speaker’s utterance elicit instances of epistemic disgust. Recall I note that epistemic disgust is prevalent in our daily communicative exchanges. The two cases I have provided in the context of US politics are telling examples. Consider also the case of an epistemically disgusted feminist:

Disgusted Feminist: A feminist has a repulsive reaction towards the utterance of a man on social media who makes the following comment under a news report of a woman who was gang raped by a group of men: “I recognize that there is something *intrinsically* wrong with rape. But what is a woman doing in a room with four men?”

The man’s comment disgusts the feminist since the man’s comment exhibits instances of objectification, victim-blaming, and failure to relate to the woman as an equal human. The repulsion that the feminist feels towards the man’s utterance is fitting in that such a comment dehumanizes the woman that was the rape victim: The comment seems to be asking *why* the woman’s rapist should treat her better as a human being if the woman wouldn’t care enough to live a decent or responsible life by not being in isolated places where men outnumber women. The repulsive reaction the feminist feels elicits instances of epistemic disgust: the feminist finds the content of the speaker’s utterance uncalled for in such a way that she does not want the speaker’s utterance to contribute to her epistemic system. This is because the utterance goes against the feminist belief that we ought to treat women as equals and relate to them as such. Allowing the man’s comment to contribute to her epistemic system undermines such an epistemic system by contaminating how the feminist makes sense of the world.

Critics might object that defining epistemic systems as “social processes” doesn’t make sense in the context of epistemic disgust because if an epistemic system is developed through a social process, it’s not internal to the speaker’s mind. In epistemic disgust, however, the hearer blocks the utterance from their epistemic system, not from some social system that they are merely a part of (they can’t do that because they lack that kind of control). But, in my view, while epistemic systems are internal to the relevant epistemic agent, the process by which that system develops is social. So, while S’s epistemic system is personal to S, S developed her epistemic system because of her interaction with the social world.

Epistemic disgust is not merely the hearer’s rejection of the speaker’s utterance from contributing to the hearer’s epistemic system. Though rejection is a necessary condition for the manifestation of epistemic disgust, it is not sufficient on its own. We often reject an utterance because we think it is false, but this need not involve disgust. Epistemic

¹⁶One may ask how the expression, “epistemic systems,” relates to other cognate terms in epistemology such as “epistemic frameworks,” “epistemic theories,” and “epistemic models.” The answer is that “epistemic system” is the umbrella under which these cognate terms fall. That is, it is part of an agent’s epistemic system that the agent approaches the world (knowingly or unknowingly) with an epistemic framework; that the agent has epistemic models for determining, for example, whose testimony to trust; and that the agent has certain epistemic theories that they use. As I see it, an agent’s disgust response could be to a phenomenon captured by one or more of those cognate epistemic terms. For instance, A can be disgusted at the fact that B’s commitment to epistemic dogmatism (epistemic framework and theory) allows B to be willfully ignorant that A is a credible speaker. I thank an anonymous reviewer for *Episteme* for pressing me to clarify this point.

disgust requires a hearer to have a *repulsive reaction* towards the speaker's utterance. This repulsive reaction, *ab initio*, is what causes the hearer's rejection of the content of the speaker's utterance for epistemic disgust to occur.

Note that I have defined epistemic disgust as "rejection of the *speaker's utterance* from contributing to the hearer's epistemic system" rather than "rejection of the *speaker*". This is because different circumstances might require that the hearer engages with the speaker. There are cases in which social bonds require that one engages, communicatively, with people whose utterances one sometimes finds disgusting. Consider, for example, the case of the Cambridge debate. In this case, James Baldwin – a 20th-century Black-American writer who advocates for the civil rights movement – has to debate William F. Buckley, a white-American conservative writer.¹⁷

Cambridge Debate: Baldwin and Buckley are both popular writers who represent different and often contrasting political standpoints in the 20th-century United States. Baldwin is a leftist writer and thinker, and Buckley is a right-wing writer and thinker. Buckley is popularly known for berating the black American liberation movements and making *wild* claims about the enslavement of black people in the United States such as "*ceteris paribus*, slavery is good for black people". Buckley's statements elicit a repulsive reaction in most black Americans, Baldwin included, and they reject such statements from contributing to the epistemic system they rely on to make sense of the oppressive world they live in since they – black Americans – think slavery is bad for black people. Baldwin and Buckley were invited to Cambridge University to debate the motion "The American dream has been achieved at the expense of the American Negro". Baldwin agrees to go to the debate as a debater even though he knows, from experience, that Buckley's arguments would disgust him as a black person.

The Cambridge Debate case illustrates the point that the manifestation of epistemic disgust requires the *rejection of the speaker's utterance* from contributing to the hearer's epistemic system and not the *rejection of the speaker*. This is noticeable in the fact that Baldwin accepts to debate Buckley knowing *very* well that Buckley's utterances would elicit in him a repulsive reaction. Though Baldwin agreed to debate Buckley, he found Buckley's comments unwelcome. In fact, Baldwin rejected them and offered an alternative view. We can also say that Buckley did find Baldwin's utterances unwanted. Buckley is a racist whose viewpoints is distorted by his racism, which makes utterances about the freedom of black people, and the equality of black and white people, elicit a repulsive reaction in him. So, due to his racism, the framework in and through which Buckley – and many epistemic agents – generates epistemic disgust reaction not only fails to track but is also prejudicial.

The cases we have encountered so far can help us identify three typical circumstances in which epistemic disgust reactions occur, namely lack of epistemic peerhood, viewpoint disagreement, and circumstance insensitivity.¹⁸ The repulsive reaction that, for example, both Baldwin and Buckley have can be explained by the fact that they are

¹⁷See Baldwin and Buckley (1965). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tek9h3a5wQ> (Accessed 7/3/2024). Note here that I depend on the details of that debate to create this case. This is not a factual case employed from that 1965 debate.

¹⁸I do not take this list as exhaustive. Other typical circumstances could generate instances of epistemic disgust, and I invite others to find other fitting typical circumstances that can generate epistemic disgust. But, *arguendo*, I am going to focus on these three typical circumstances that I believe are running in the cases I am working with.

not epistemic peers. They do not have access to (a) the same evidence despite living in America (= Baldwin's lived experience as a Black person in America differs from that of Buckley, a white man living in America);¹⁹ (b) they do not possess the same expertise about issues affecting Black people in the United States due to (a); and (c) they do not possess the same motivation and reasoning skills in relation to the issues Black people face in the United States. However, it should be noted that though Buckley is at an epistemic disadvantage in knowing the workings of oppressive social structure as Black people do, making himself an epistemic peer is not impossible.²⁰ As Dror argues, even though the oppressed have a contingent epistemic advantage as regards the system that oppresses them, they don't have an ineliminable advantage (Dror, 2023). The upshot of Dror's argument is that a privileged person such as Buckley would not be epistemically disadvantaged were it not for his failure to listen and understand the testimonies of the oppressed (rather than berating them) in light of the experiences they share. Even an act of ignorance can disgust hearers if the ignorance is willful. When a speaker speaks from a position of deep ignorance, which is clearly due to their willingness to ignore evidence, it can be infuriating. As a result, hearers often become disgusted by the speaker's utterances.²¹ Being willfully ignorant, Dotson warns, allows an epistemic agent to maintain and utilize "structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm . . ." (2012: 31) for members of oppressed social groups.

The second typical circumstance is "viewpoint disagreement." Viewpoint disagreement refers to when agents disagree on a topic because of how they live and operate in the world. Both Baldwin and Buckley have different viewpoints. Baldwin is a Black-American writer who operates as a leftist and an advocate for the American civil rights movement whereas Buckley is a white-American who operates as a conservative and

¹⁹This is what Dror terms the "workings of social marginalization" (Dror 2023: 619). For a critical examination of how the workings of social marginalization give the marginalized a superior advantage to knowing about the social workings of marginalization, see Mills (2013) and Harding (2004: 7–9).

²⁰In fact, in *actively* failing to listen to the testimonies of the oppressed (but rather berate them) in light of the experience members of the oppressed share and aim to overturn, Buckley is guilty of what Poulhaus (2012) terms "willful hermeneutical ignorance". Poulhaus uses willful hermeneutical ignorance to refer to cases in which members of a dominant epistemic group fail to acknowledge the epistemic tools that members of a dominated epistemic group develop. Importantly, also, if Buckley, as a member of a privileged social group, invites members of socially oppressed groups to educate him about the nature of their oppression without adequate compensation or recognition, he is guilty of what Berenstein (2016) terms "epistemic exploitation". The exploitative aspects of an epistemic quest "are exemplified by the unpaid nature of the educational labor and its associated opportunity costs, the double bind that marginalized persons must navigate when faced with the demand to educate, and the need for additional labor created by the default skepticism of the privileged" (2016: 1).

²¹One could object that Buckley suffers what Tilton terms a *strong epistemic disadvantage thesis* – the claim that there are "substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know about the oppression that they do not personally experience" (2024: 1). But this objection depends, in part, on the success of the view that members of a socially dominant group cannot achieve the standpoints of the socially oppressed group. Suppose we agree with Dror that oppression only offers a contingent epistemic advantage for the oppressed and a standpoint can be achieved *in principle* if a member of a socially dominant group (and even a member of an oppressed social group) is willing to do the "work" required to achieve a standpoint (2023). In that case, the strong epistemic disadvantage thesis fails. However, one way to make oneself an epistemic peer is to take marginalized lives in at least some inquiry as the "starting point, because those lives provide resources that enable accurate investigation into the structure of our social world" (Tilton 2024: 3). For example, see Taiwo (2020). Taiwo argues that rather than defer to marginalized people on issues concerning their oppression, what we should do is jettison deferential practices and tend towards a constructive practice in which members of socially dominant groups allow socially marginalized people in the room in such a way that the marginalized offers their standpoint and that is used as a starting point in constructing a more just world.

right-wing writer. That Buckley and Baldwin are not epistemic peers explain their viewpoint differences. This viewpoint difference is also explicit in the case of the disgusted feminist. Had it been that both the feminist and the man who made the disgusting comment on social media shared the same viewpoint about *how* we ought to treat every human being, it would be that either the feminist agrees with the man who commented on the news report on social media or the man equally finds such comments disgusting when another person makes it under a post about a woman who was raped.

Note here that two people can have very different viewpoints without eliciting disgust at each other's utterances. However, typically, when a speaker's utterance elicits repulsion in the hearer, the hearer and the speaker do not share the same viewpoint about the particular content of the speaker's utterance. This is because utterances are topic-based. The epistemic disgust that the hearer has towards the speaker's utterance is, thus, *sensitive to the particular topic the utterance is about*. The speaker and hearer can have viewpoint agreement in other domains, but they lack such agreement in the particular domain that causes the hearer to be repulsed by the speaker's utterance. The same thing goes for epistemic peerhood. Epistemic peerhood, also, is sensitive to a particular topic. The speaker and the hearer can be epistemic peers in another propositional domain, but they lack such epistemic peerhood in the particular propositional domain that causes the hearer to be repulsed by the speaker's utterance.

In addition to a lack of epistemic peerhood and viewpoint disagreement as typical circumstances that give rise to epistemic disgust, the insensitivity of the speaker to an event or topic can also give rise to epistemic disgust. I call this *circumstance insensitivity*. Circumstance insensitivity refers to when a speaker is insensitive to the circumstances in which an event or topic is situated when uttering a statement. Such insensitivity can cause the hearer to be epistemically disgusted by the speaker's utterance. For a telling example, consider a scene from Bong Joon-ho's 2019 movie *Parasite*.

Parasite. Kim Ki-taek is the head of the destitute Kim family. Kim is the driver of Mrs. Park, wife to the wealthy Mr. Park. One day, on their way home from the supermarket, Mrs. Park says to Mr. Park on the phone "Today the sky is so blue, and no pollution! Thanks to all the rain yesterday." Though Mrs. Park knows Kim's destitute condition, unbeknownst to Mrs. Park the rain had flooded the house where Kim lives with his family. Kim was repulsed by Mrs. Park's utterance because of her insensitivity to his condition and that of his family.

As we can see, Kim and Mrs. Park are not epistemic peers, and they have different viewpoints. Kim experiences the world as a poor man, and Mrs. Park as a wealthy woman. However, Mrs. Park's insensitivity to Kim's condition and her non-willful ignorance about what the rain means to Kim caused her to utter what disgusted Kim. Lack of epistemic peerhood and viewpoint differences are typical circumstances that give rise to epistemic disgust. However, one might not be disgusted by a speaker's utterance even when they are not epistemic peers or have the same viewpoints. For instance, Kim wasn't disgusted by everything Mrs. Park or Mr. Park said. But when one is disgusted by a speaker's utterance, the manifestation of epistemic disgust relies on the presence of at least one typical circumstance about the particular topic or issue that elicits the disgust in the hearer. If lack of epistemic peerhood or viewpoint disagreement is not present, then circumstance insensitivity could be what explains disgust. For instance, it is possible that Mr. Park, who has the same viewpoint as his wife (call it "viewpoint about *what one ought not to utter in the presence of a destitute person*"), is disgusted by his wife's utterance. Say, Mr. Park is aware of Kim's destitute condition and because of that he

responds to his wife, “What you just said is disgusting. Aren’t you aware that the rain you appreciate for clearing the sky and pollution might not be good for Kim who lives in a slum that is affected by even the lightest rain? You’re very insensitive to other people’s suffering and your utterance disgusts me.” Here, however, the viewpoint Mr. Park shares with his wife is broad, not a *particular-topic* viewpoint. Though Mr. Park and Mrs. Park have the same broad viewpoint about the relevant issue, Mr. Park’s sensitivity to Kim’s condition allows him to develop a sensitivity – a sensitivity that Mrs. Park lacks. This sensitivity is what allows Mr. Park to develop a different viewpoint about the particular topic of *what one ought not to utter in the presence of a destitute person* (V_1): Given that Kim is destitute, because of his sensitivity to the issue, Mr. Park deduced from (V_1) an additional viewpoint, which is that *he ought not to utter some statements in the presence of Kim* (V_2). Mr. Park’s two viewpoints:

(V_1): what one ought not to utter in the presence of a destitute person.

(V_2): (deduced from V_1) Kim is destitute. So, I ought not to utter some statements in the presence of Kim.

Recall that circumstance insensitivity, lack of epistemic peerhood, and viewpoint disagreement, are typical circumstances that can give rise to epistemic disgust on their own. The three don’t have to be present when an agent is disgusted by a speaker’s utterance who makes an outrageous claim in light of how the hearer makes sense of the world in any typical circumstances. Though the three can all be present sometimes in an instance of epistemic disgust, it is not necessary. One can simply be disgusted because of the presence of just one of these three typical circumstances. In Kim’s case – also Cambridge Debate and the disgusted feminist case – the three typical circumstances are present for the manifestation of epistemic disgust. However, in Mr. Park’s case, only circumstance insensitivity may be what is present in his experience of epistemic disgust. Consider if Mrs. Park and Mr. Park are aware of the flood at Kim’s house last night, and just like her husband she has the same viewpoint about the particular topic (V_2) but because she is used to talking to her husband without considering how sensitive the topic is, she made the same utterance in the presence of Kim, and both her husband and Kim express disgust at her utterance. In this case, the typical circumstance of viewpoint difference is not present in Mr. Park’s experience of epistemic disgust. The only present typical circumstance is Mrs. Park’s *circumstance insensitivity* to the particular topic that makes up the content of her utterance, a topic to which Mr. Park is sensitive.

The typical situation of circumstance insensitivity shows that both willful and non-willful ignorance can generate a disgust response. In the original *Parasite* case, Mrs. Park was non-willfully ignorant but was still insensitive to Kim’s condition. In the altered case, where Mr. Park and Mrs. Park know about the effect of the rain on Kim’s house, she is willfully ignorant.

Some might disagree: Although Mrs. Park shares the same viewpoint as Mr. Park about *what one ought not to say in the presence of destitute people* (V_1), she did not make the inference (V_2) that Mr. Park made from (V_1). So, Mr. Park has an additional viewpoint (V_2) that Mrs. Park lacks because of the inference Mr. Park made from (V_1): Though Mrs. Park shares (V_1) with Mr. Park, her circumstance insensitivity shows she does not share the other viewpoint (V_2) that Mr. Park has. So, at least, these critics might say, two typical circumstances need to be present in cases that elicit epistemic disgust. But it is unclear to me how Mrs. Park couldn’t have drawn the same conclusion Mr. Park drew in (V_2) and still utter what disgusted Mr. Park *because she is used to talking to her*

husband without considering how sensitive the topic is. If the circumstances were different (say Kim wasn't present when Mrs. Park uttered that statement), it might have been the case that Mr. Park wouldn't have been disgusted with Mrs. Park's utterance since they are aware of each other's viewpoint about the relevant issue. But Kim's presence and the insensitivity of Mrs. Park's utterance to Kim's condition causes Mr. Park to be disgusted at Mrs. Park's utterance. Compare: It is possible that an epistemic peer who shares the same viewpoint could, in an attempt to poke or joke, say something we find disgusting. In this case, the phenomenon wouldn't be lacking the former two typical circumstances but circumstance insensitivity.

This Parasite case also allows us to make sense of something else. Epistemic disgust does not only manifest when we feel like someone is saying something deeply false. Epistemic disgust can also be felt towards utterances that are clearly true but, due to our sensitivities, insensitive. Mrs. Park's utterance, for example, is true: the sky is blue because the clouds have evaporated, and the air smells less polluted. However, her true statement was insensitive to Kim's condition, and it elicited a repulsive reaction in him.

The analysis of epistemic disgust spelled out so far shows that when we are repulsed by a speaker's utterance, to use Joensuu's apt words, it "signals a threat" (2020) that the presence of an utterance – that is filled with content "deemed a contaminant" (Nussbaum 2004: 84) – pose to one's epistemic system. As Miller argues, when disgust signals a threat, the disgusted agent rejects the object of disgust because the agent aims to preserve the "integrity of the self" by imposing a distance between the self and the object of disgust (1993). Epistemic disgust also signals a threat to the disgusted agent in this same manner. When epistemic disgust signals a threat, the epistemically disgusted agent rejects the utterance of the speaker from contributing to her epistemic system because the agent wants to preserve the integrity of her epistemic self by imposing a distance between the propositional system she relies on in making sense of the world and the utterance that disgusts her.²² The threat a speaker's utterance signals to the hearer is a result of the hearer's finding the disgusting utterance "unassimilable" because the hearer's and the speaker's views about the particular topic are too different. This is why an agent experiences epistemic disgust as a state of epistemic alarm, an indication that the agent's epistemic system faces a threat and needs preservation (cf. Menninghaus 2003).

The fact that epistemic disgust is *not mutually* experienced by both the speaker and the hearer also helps us to understand why it functions to signal a threat of the presence of an utterance that our epistemic system deems a contaminant and thus immediately rejects.²³ When we are epistemically disgusted by a speaker's utterance, we place what the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber calls a "distance" between us and the speaker's utterance, and we start *relating* with the speaker as an "epistemic other" that is *too* epistemically different (Buber 1992). When we "set the distance", we grant that the speaker doesn't share some typical circumstances with us. We set such distance because epistemic disgust usually works to "protect" the hearer's epistemic system from threats

²²The integrity of the agent's epistemic self is from the agent's point of view. The question of whether the agent has or lacks such epistemic integrity doesn't matter here.

²³Note: Epistemic disgust can be experienced at the same event if the parties involved are both speakers and hearers at the same event. E.g., the epistemic disgust both Baldwin and Buckley feel towards each other's utterances in the Cambridge debate. However, this is not a mutual experience in my opinion. Mutuality requires commonality. One of them wouldn't be epistemically disgusted if one is a speaker and not a hearer, and the other is a hearer and not a speaker.

of epistemic contaminant – a threat that poses a danger to the person’s epistemic self.²⁴ An explanation for this is, as Nussbaum argues, that “disgust is motivated primarily by ideational factors: the nature or origin of the item and its social history” (2004: 88). Nussbaum argues that these ideational factors lead to “magical ideas” and “magical thinking” about contamination that pushes agents that come across elicitors of disgust to strive for purity. Magical thinking about disgust leads to the self-belief that close contact with a disgusting object will contaminate the self with its perceived “badness.”²⁵ This explains why epistemic disgust is not mutually experienced: epistemic disgust is an experience that requires two or more active subjects to occur.²⁶ When epistemic disgust occurs, the hearer (the subject) feels repulsed by the speaker’s utterance (the object of epistemic disgust). Because of the ideational factors that are operative in epistemic disgust, it would either be that if both the speaker and hearer are epistemic peers that share the same viewpoint and sensitivity about the topic of the speaker’s utterance, (i) the speaker’s utterance elicits a repulsion in both the speaker and the hearer or (ii) the hearer would not be repulsed by the speaker’s utterance, nor would both be repulsed by the utterance. That the hearer is epistemically disgusted by the speaker’s utterance ought to serve as an indicator to the hearer that they are too epistemically different about the relevant topic.

One might wonder how disgusting utterances don’t contribute to our epistemic system if our epistemic system is causing us to reject it. For example, one might ask, if one responds to disgusting utterances, hasn’t the agent somehow let such utterance enter her epistemic system, even to figure out what to say in reply? However, consider a case that has to do with physical disgust. John has been away for several weeks. When he returned to his apartment, he looked inside his kitchen cabinet for food. He saw a rotten apple and was immediately repulsed by it, and his disgust system caused him to immediately reject it from contributing to his nutritional system. Though John sees and perceives the disgusting apple, it cannot be said of John that the apple contributed to the domain the apple would have contributed to had it not been a disgusting apple. This case easily extends to the epistemic disgust phenomenon. Though the hearer hears the speaker’s utterance or reads the speaker’s words, her epistemic disgust system causes her to immediately reject the utterance. As a result, the utterance does not contribute to her epistemic system in a meaningful way, similar to how John’s repulsive reaction means he couldn’t use the rotten apple in any meaningful way to contribute to his nutritional system. The hearer did not use the utterance in a meaningful way because the utterance

²⁴Biological and psychological researchers have made a similar point about physical disgust. But their point schematically differs. Physical disgust protects the body and soul from threats (see, for example, Miller 2004; Rozin *et al.*, 2000). Epistemic disgust protects, on the other hand, one’s epistemic system.

²⁵Rozin and Fallon use these ideational factors operative in disgust to defend the view that it is not just the properties of the disgusting object that determine the object’s badness, but the subject’s conception and perception of the object (1987). I agree with this view when it comes to epistemic disgust, but I defer saying more about this to future works.

²⁶A critic can challenge: But an agent can say something and be disgusted by her own utterance at a later time. The protagonist of Sartre’s (1964) novel *Nausea* expresses this when he reports feeling disgusted with his own (lifeless and passionless) idea: ‘But that wasn’t the worst: before me, posed with a sort of indolence, was a voluminous, insipid idea. I did not see clearly what it was, but it sickened me so much I couldn’t look at it’ [*ibid.*: 5]. In this case, I think, the agent who uttered and felt disgusted at his own utterance is not the same because the state of mind at the time of making such utterance is now different from when she comes to be disgusted by such an utterance. The change in the agent’s state of mind is why she is disgusted, and I think a plausible argument could be made that even when it is the same bodily person, there is something to be said about how the different state of mind changes the subject. The agent’s past self is, simply put, different from his present self.

does not elevate the sub-domains of the hearer's epistemic system, such as knowledge, beliefs, and opinions, among others. Though Baldwin knows that Buckley's utterances are disgusting, they do not contribute to Baldwin's epistemic system because they do not elevate Baldwin's epistemic system.

4. Two forms of epistemic disgust

I identified two forms of epistemic disgust from the theoretical argument I have been making so far: (1) *epistemic disgust as regards the agent's utterance* (e.g., Disgusted Feminist) and (2) *epistemic disgust as regards the speaker's personality* (e.g., Cambridge Debate and Parasite).

4.1. Epistemic disgust as regards the agent's utterance

When people rely on the workings of their mind, in light of their epistemic system, they sometimes make utterances that elicit repulsion in us, even when we're unfamiliar with their personality or character. When such utterances conflict with how we make sense of the world and elicit a repulsive reaction in us, we sometimes *immediately* reject such utterances from contributing to our epistemic system. The first form of epistemic disgust concerns cases of this kind: When an utterance elicits a repulsive reaction, thus causing us to reject such utterance from contributing to our epistemic system.

This first form has to do with when the propositional content of an epistemic agent's utterance disgusts the hearer in such a way that elicits a repulsive reaction in the hearer. For an example of the first kind of epistemic disgust, consider again the disgusted feminist above. The feminist is repulsed by the social media commenter's comment because he seems to be making an outrageous claim in light of the viewpoint, reasoning skill, and motivational force that the feminist thinks should be guiding an agent in making sense of human life. The feminist is not repulsed by the comment because of the identity of the commenter, but rather because of the content of the utterance.

4.2. Epistemic disgust as regards the speaker's personality

Epistemic disgust as regards the speaker's utterance is an *easy-to-recognize* form of epistemic disgust. But a more subtle sort of epistemic disgust needs to be distinguished from the first form. This has to do with the speaker's personality. We can have a sub-rational or emotional response of disgust to a speaker's utterance because of their personality or character. For example, consider the Parasite case. It is well within the jurisdiction of Kim's reaction to be repulsed by Mrs. Park's utterance because of her "rich woman" personality. We are repulsed by some people's utterances because of their personality. The repulsion we have for these people sometimes affects how we uptake their utterances. If we are repulsed by an agent's personality or character, we sometimes *immediately* reject some of their utterances from contributing to our epistemic system. However, we are not epistemically disgusted purely on the basis of someone's personality. *We experience epistemic disgust in this second form when the speaker's personality contributes to the epistemic disgust reaction with a suitably disgusting utterance.* To make sense of this point, consider that we would not be repulsed if another person uttered the same statement.²⁷ For instance, it is unclear if Kim (and Mr. Park) would be epistemically disgusted if another destitute person made Mrs. Park's utterance.

²⁷One might object that there are many cases where there's nothing about the content of the speaker's utterance that is disgusting, yet someone is disgusted by the person and so is disgusted by utterances that,

The second form of epistemic disgust concerns cases of this kind: when an epistemic agent's personality anchors the sort of reaction we have towards the agent's "disgusting utterances". Take for instance the repulsive reaction some hearers feel when someone they regard as having a bad character makes an utterance. An example of this is the Parasite case. Another example is when a sexist man fails to allow the utterances of a woman, whom he considers a "radical feminist", to contribute to his epistemic system. There is a sense in which his sexist view of women leads him to be epistemically disgusted by women's utterances, such as when a woman says, "Men and women are equal". Another example of this form of epistemic disgust is to revise the characters and consider the sort of repulsive reaction a woman might feel when her coworker who is known to be a sexist says that *implicit sexism* is not a thing in her workplace when she has experienced different forms of implicit sexism at the same workplace.

In these cases, it is permissible to think it is just the utterances that disgust the hearer, and it has nothing to do with the speaker's personality or character. But consider that if the same claim is made by a peer, the utterance might not elicit a repulsive reaction in the hearer (but a shock). Consider again the Cambridge Debate case – which is an adequate form of epistemic disgust as regards the speaker's personality. I think some black people would be shocked if Baldwin woke up one day making Buckley-like claims, rather than being repulsed by the Buckley-like utterances Baldwin is now making. Of course, if Baldwin kept making Buckley-like utterances, it would become well-known to some black people that this reflects Baldwin's new character and personality. They would then develop the same repulsive reaction to Baldwin's Buckley-like utterances that they have to Buckley's.

5. Epistemic disgust and related concepts

5.1. Is epistemic disgust different from moral disgust?

Most of the cases I have been using to explain epistemic disgust seem to involve moral issues. But is epistemic disgust the same as moral disgust? No. Though they can overlap, there are features that we only tend to observe in one case but not in the other.

First, though moral and epistemic disgust can *deeply* influence how we perceive, react, and interact with a person or a piece of information, they have different foundations. Moral disgust is an emotional response people have towards extremely bad conduct,²⁸ such as sexual abuse of children.²⁹ It can also be an emotional response one experiences when one hears that other people have violated a moral norm.³⁰ Though some of the

if uttered by someone else, would not be at all disgusting. Indeed, I think, this is extremely common. Some people *can* be disgusted by everything Donald Trump says, even when Trump says entirely unobjectionable things. A student could be disgusted by everything the professor says, but if those same words had come from the mouth of a different professor or a colleague, the student would not have been disgusted. But I do think this objection is merely an example of how disgust might be influencing an agent's epistemic judgments or evaluations. As pointed out in footnote 4, I refer to these as cases of what I call "transferred epistemic disgust" and not the sort of cases I am exploring in this paper – cases that have to do with when a hearer finds a speaker's utterance repulsive. For an exploration of transferred epistemic disgust, see Odeyemi (In preparation). For epistemic disgust to be a fitting response to a speaker's utterance in this second form, the speaker's personality needs to contribute to the disgust with suitably disgusting utterance.

²⁸See Giubilini (2016); Fileva (2021); Miller (1997); and Rozin and Fallon (1987).

²⁹This view has been labeled "Moral Dyspepsia Hypothesis" by Royzman, *et al.* (2008). This view has been defended by Haidt *et al.* (2007); Rozin *et al.* (1999); and Kumar (2017).

³⁰There are skeptics about moral disgust. The skeptics of moral disgust argue that moral disgust is either not really moral or not really disgust. For example, Royzman and Sabini (2001) argue that moral disgust is a metaphor people use to express the moral response they feel toward a moral violation (2001). Some

cases have a moral feature, epistemic disgust need not be about moral issues. That is, morality need not necessarily feature in a communicative exchange for a hearer to be repulsed by a speaker's utterance, causing the hearer to reject the speaker's utterance from contributing to the hearer's epistemic system. Epistemic disgust, simply put, could occur in cases where the discussion at hand has nothing to do with morality. Consider, for example, the repulsion one feels when one hears or reads pseudoscientific claims or conspiracy theories. Consider, also, how a Christian hearer might be repulsed by the utterance of a speaker who says, "life is meaningless"; or the repulsion some religious people feel when an atheist says to them "God does not exist". Epistemic disgust – as we have seen in the examples discussed – can also be felt toward utterances related to moral issues. However, what makes them epistemic disgust rather than moral disgust is that the repulsion is a reaction that concerns the "epistemic", which is about or relating to knowledge or degree of acceptance of a speaker's utterance. That is, epistemic disgust is an aversion due to a repulsive reaction to certain expressed ideas, beliefs, or knowledge uttered that is perceived by the hearer as repulsive or deeply offensive.

Unlike moral disgust, which typically concerns conduct that violates moral norms, epistemic disgust is *primarily* about propositional content.³¹ It involves a repulsive reaction to *utterances* that are perceived as threatening, immoral, or deeply objectionable on a cognitive or belief-based level. Moral disgust, on the other hand, is a reaction moral agents have towards an agent's action, rather than the utterance of an epistemic agent. I note here that one can feel disgusted upon hearing an utterance that describes an action. This, however, in my view, is a case of moral disgust since the hearer's disgust reaction is directed at the action being described rather than primarily the speaker's utterance. So, for example, an agent can be disgusted by what is being described in a rape case but not disgusted by the utterances of the reporter who describes the case. Compare the disgusted feminist. The man did not perform an action but expressed a view that the feminist finds objectionable. She doesn't want this kind of worldview to contaminate her epistemic system. Certainly, there are numerous moral reasons why this worldview is problematic, but the primary issue here seems to be that the woman feels repulsed by someone uttering these beliefs. Epistemic disgust occurs when accepting someone's statement appears to threaten the integrity of our own epistemic system. This could happen if the belief requires us to accept a harmful falsehood, undermines our epistemic values, or exposes us to a worldview we consider epistemically inferior. While we can learn about various moral wrongs through others' testimony without feeling compromised as epistemic agents, a statement describing a morally repugnant act doesn't automatically trigger epistemic disgust. However, it can do so if it threatens our epistemic agency in addition to its moral implications.³²

Secondly, since there is a difference between feeling disgusted because of *what you said* and *what you did*, epistemic disgust and moral disgust also arise in different contexts. Epistemic disgust arises in the context of communicative exchanges. It arises when a hearer encounters an utterance that a speaker intends as information or

psychologists believe that violations of moral norms elicit the emotional response of anger in a moral observer and not disgust. For example, see Nabi (2002). However, some psychologists have also challenged this view and argued that moral disgust is a separate emotion from anger. For example, see Haidt (1997) and Rozin *et al.* (2008). See Fileva (2021) for an argument for the constitutive features of moral disgust. Cross-cultural differences have been observed in moral disgust. See Haidt *et al.* (2007).

³¹Even in cases where the disgust is caused by the speaker's character, the disgust is still primarily a reaction to the speaker's utterance. What the speaker's character does is to cause the hearer to repulse the propositional content of the speaker's utterance.

³²I am indebted to Julia Staffel for pressing me on this point and for suggesting this response.

perspective that challenges the hearer's understanding of the world, but the hearer sub-rationally and immediately finds it to be fundamentally flawed both by the reasoning force her epistemic system allows and the evidence available to him. Moral disgust is, on the other hand, often related to outrageous violations of moral norms. It arises in the context of a moral witness having an emotional response to an actor's behavior, action, or practice that the witness perceives as deeply immoral, cruel, or repugnant.

Here is what a critic might say. Since utterances involve speech acts then the distinction between "*what you said* and *what you did*" did not fly. So epistemic disgust is not different from moral disgust for the reason that speech acts count as action. But I think this objection is missing something important. There is a difference between being disgusted at the propositional content of what you said and being disgusted at the act of you saying it. What causes a hearer to be disgusted at a speaker's utterance is the content of such utterance rather than the speaker's act of making such an utterance. There is a difference between being disgusted at your utterance that *p* and being disgusted because of your act of uttering that *p*. Epistemic disgust concerns the former. Epistemic disgust is not about the act of speaking but what is being uttered. When a hearer is disgusted, she is disgusted because of what the speaker uttered rather than the act of the speaker uttering it.³³

Importantly, what triggers epistemic disgust is different from that of moral disgust. Epistemic disgust is triggered by utterances that we want to avoid so as not to contaminate our epistemic system because they are perceived or imagined as irrational or deeply objectionable. Moral disgust, on the other hand, is triggered by moral features of actions or agents. Fileva's recent account of the constitutive features of moral disgust helps to specifically differentiate moral disgust and epistemic disgust in principle (2021). In Fileva's account, the constitutive features of moral disgust are: (i) moral disgust has a moral elicitor (it is triggered by moral properties of people, actions, etc.); (ii) moral disgust has moral properties as its intentional object (it is directed at moral properties) (ibid: 26-30); and (iii) moral disgust always involves moral judgments (in which case to say something is morally disgusting is to say that it is morally wrong) (ibid: 25-26). But, in my view, these features need not be present in cases of epistemic disgust. For instance, an epistemic agent might be disgusted by a motivational quote.³⁴ In this case, the agent's disgust reaction is not triggered by any specific moral properties, it is not directed at any moral property, nor does it have to involve a moral judgment.

Some of the cases I have used in demystifying epistemic disgust involve moral issues. So, there are many cases in which there is a relationship between epistemic disgust and moral disgust, which is that they *can* often overlap – in which some cases are both instances of moral disgust and epistemic disgust: a hearer finds an utterance disgusting because it contains deeply immoral contents. So, a hearer who finds an utterance morally disgusting can find it epistemically disgusting as well. However epistemic disgust need not have a moral component, and moral disgust need not involve an epistemic component. Consider the last point first. A morally disgusting fictional character may

³³Note, it can be both in cases where they overlap. A can be disgusted by what B said and the fact that B said it (rather than B keeping her disgusting thoughts to herself).

³⁴Fileva briefly examines a similar idea through her analysis of a passage from Sartre's *Nausea*. In this passage, "the protagonist reports disgust with what we, today, might call 'motivational quotes': 'People. You must love people. Men are admirable. I want to vomit – and suddenly, there it is: the Nausea' [1964: 122]. In another passage, the narrator reports feeling disgusted with his own (lifeless and passionless) idea: 'My passion was dead. For years it had rolled over and submerged me; now I felt empty. But that wasn't the worst: before me, posed with a sort of indolence, was a voluminous, insipid idea. I did not see clearly what it was, but it sickened me so much I couldn't look at it' [ibid.: 5]. The disgust described here is not – or at least need not be – physical, although it is qualitatively similar to physical disgust" (2021: 30).

not provoke in us epistemic disgust. Quite the opposite: a morally disgusting fictional character such as Hannibal Lecter or Dexter Morgan may be attractive to viewers. Regarding the second point, epistemic disgust can be felt and expressed at non-moral properties such as irrationality. So, the two kinds of disgust are separable and can occur in isolation from each other though they can also overlap. But there are also cases of each that are not the other. In as much as epistemic disgust can also (i) be felt and expressed at utterances that have nothing to do with morality and (ii) is primarily felt and expressed at utterances rather than behaviors, then, on a broader level, epistemic disgust is not the same as moral disgust.³⁵

5.2. How does epistemic disgust differs from cases of deep disagreement?

A critic might object that epistemic disgust's main feature is akin to epistemic deep disagreement. After all, this analysis of epistemic disgust shows that the speaker and the hearer disagree on a particular topic and are unable to persuade each other through epistemically cogent arguments. Yet, I will argue that epistemic disgust is something over and above deep disagreement. In deep disagreement, disputant A and B's disagreement is inspired by an *incommensurable epistemic system* that the involved disputants come to *be aware of* after rational explanations have been offered as to why each disputant's epistemic system is the correct one (Boghossian 2006). This deep disagreement would *likely* provoke a rational inquiry from disputant A who considers whether he is mistaken in his belief that *p* in light of the arguments B offered to support his belief that $\sim p$, and vice versa (Lynch 2016). In epistemic disgust, however, the speaker's utterance is *immediately* rejected because the hearer feels repulsion, which signals a threat of the presence of a potential epistemic contaminant that the hearer's doxastic contaminant-avoidance system wants to avoid. In epistemic deep disagreement, disputants at least enter into a rational consideration before disagreeing on the relevant issue. In epistemic disgust, the *immediate* rejection is a sub-rational immediate response that the hearer has to the speaker's utterance. Of course, the hearer could later probe why he is disgusted by the speaker's utterance. He can also later probe why such a repulsive reaction causes him to reject the speaker's utterance. But when the utterance is rejected "immediately", the hearer at that moment is not aware of the reasons he might have as to why he rejected the speaker's utterance except that he is repulsed by such utterance that his doxastic contaminant-avoidance system prompts him to *ab initio* reject the utterance before any rational considerations.³⁶ Compare: (a) John immediately rejects eating the chicken in his fridge because it has an odor that disgusts him when he opens it. (b) John decided not to eat the chicken in his fridge because he saw on the label that it expired a week ago. In both cases, John is rejecting the chicken from contributing to his nutritional system, but his reasons are different. (a) is an immediate sub-rational response. (b) is a decision that comes from knowing that eating expired food is bad.

Importantly, however, epistemic disgust shares one essential feature with deep disagreement: the intrinsic value of self-trust. As some have argued (e.g., Pasnau 2015), the intrinsic value disputants place on self-trust is why deep disagreement endures. Epistemic disgust, too, sub-rationally places such value on self-trust. A repulsed agent's disgust system would *immediately* reject an utterance perceived as disgusting because the

³⁵I am grateful to Iskra Fileva for pressing me on this point and for offering many of the analogies used here.

³⁶Here is a harder question: What is the function of epistemic disgust, so that someone who is only capable of being in a deep disagreement, but lacks an epistemic disgust reaction, would miss out on something? This is an important question. But I defer this question to future work.

agent's epistemic system immediately finds the utterance (the elicitor of disgust) lacking in trust but places such trust on the disgusted agent's epistemic system.

6. Is epistemic disgust epistemically problematic?

We sometimes have a repulsive reaction toward people's utterances, or so I have argued. This repulsive reaction sometimes causes us to *immediately* reject the utterance that causes our repulsion from contributing to our epistemic system. This, as I have argued, constitutes the phenomenon I term epistemic disgust. However, is epistemic disgust epistemically problematic?

One could argue that epistemic disgust is not problematic since it is a reaction that we don't seem to have control over. That is, we don't seem to consciously select the propositional contents that elicit a repulsive reaction in us, thus causing us to reject such contents from contributing to our epistemic system. But once we distinguish between something being problematic on the one hand, and blamelessness on the other, it is plausible, I think, to say that an epistemically disgusted agent might meet the conditions for the latter but not the former.³⁷ An agent's epistemic disgust is a product of repulsion the agent has no control over: it is a non-volitional act that excuses the permissibility of the agent's epistemic disgust but does not, therefore, make it justified or non-problematic.³⁸

One of the reasons "epistemic disgust" is problematic is that the repulsive reaction a hearer has towards a speaker's utterance can lead to a strong desire in the hearer to distance herself from the ideas of the speaker's utterance or to dismiss them outright without engaging in rational discourse or analysis. That is, epistemic disgust can cause individuals to find it difficult to consider other viewpoints or engage in constructive dialogue about contentious topics.

The epistemically problematic thing about epistemic disgust here is that it might lead the hearer to reject the content of a speaker's utterance without rational discourse or analysis, thus causing the hearer to uphold bad ideologies. It could be that if hearers enter a rational discourse or analysis with the speaker, they could benefit from a more just world that allows them to propagate better ideologies. Instead of rejecting utterances, we let our disgust-response encourage constructive dialogue and inquiry. There is no epistemic disadvantage to hearing people out and rationalizing their utterances. Since we are rational, we can select or not select their epistemic offerings.³⁹

³⁷Cf. Srinivasan (2020: 399).

³⁸Some might object: are epistemically disgusted agents really blameless if they fail to uptake what the speaker said (in cases where they should)? Because even though we usually can't control our emotions, we're not their slaves. I can choose to listen to you even if I have a strong emotional adverse reaction. Maybe it's not easy, but not impossible. My emotions and my choice to listen are not the same thing. I see the point of this objection. I do think, however, that what we will be blaming the disgusted agent for is not the agent's epistemic disgust. Rather it will be the agent's failure to uptake the speaker's utterance, which is a different thing. However, for the present purpose, I set aside the ethical question of how we ought to treat both the utterances and the agents whose utterances epistemically disgust us. I also set aside the epistemic question of what the rational consideration ought to be when we encounter utterances that disgust us. I defer these questions to future works.

³⁹A very important question could be asked here: do we owe someone a rational discourse if we think what they say is so offensive that we are repulsed by it? If someone says, for example, that black people are genetically less intelligent, it seems to me I am justified to just ignore them. As pointed out in footnote 39, the question of what the rational consideration ought to be when we encounter utterances that disgust us is a work I defer to future works. *Ad hoc*, it suffices to say that we can sometimes be disgusted by the utterance of

The point here is that we sometimes do a disservice (to ourselves and others) when we don't reflect rationally on people's utterances. For example, consider how the racist jurors in Harper Lee's (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird* might have had a repulsive reaction to Tom Robinson's words. When Tom, the falsely accused black defendant, says he "felt sorry" for Mayella Ewell (the girl he was accused of raping) and explains that he stopped by her house to help. The repulsion due to their prejudice could affect their judgment.⁴⁰ If their racism had not caused them to be repulsed by Tom's utterance and they had not rejected it from contributing to their epistemic systems, they could have made appropriate inferences that could provide them with adequate epistemic grounds to judge Tom rather than treat him unjustly. Tom's case exemplifies epistemic disgust tied to a speaker rather than merely the proposition and we can imagine that the jurors would not be repulsed if a white person uttered Tom's statement.

Tom's case helps us map out an important point: an agent's repulsive reaction to a speaker's utterance can be due to identity prejudice held against the speaker and this can further lead to reliance on deficient epistemic resources, which might lead to a treatment of the speaker unfairly in her capacity as a knower. We live in an unjust social and epistemic hierarchical world that can lead hearers to have disgust-responses that entirely fail to track reality and, further, a bias against the evidence. Consider the Cambridge Debate. The fact that Buckley can also be disgusted by the utterances of black people shows that the target domain of a given disgust response can fail to track the phenomena in question: the framework in and through which Buckley interprets the target domain not only fails to track but is also prejudicial. When we downgrade the epistemic credibility of those whose utterances we find disgusting in light of our all-too-narrow repulsive reaction – as Buckley and the jurors did – it can, as philosopher Joel Reynolds warns, constitute a form of testimonial injustice (2024: 316).⁴¹

This explains another reason epistemic disgust is epistemically problematic: the jurors' repulsive reaction to Tom's utterance and rejection of his utterance allows them to treat Tom unfairly in his capacity as a knower. This is an instance of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Epistemic injustice is an injustice done to a person when she is unfairly treated in her capacity as an epistemic agent due to prejudicial stereotypes held against her. In this case, by letting the repulsion they feel towards Tom's utterance because of identity prejudice held against Tom cause them to give Tom's testimony less credibility than he would have been given, the jurors commit a specific form of epistemic injustice Fricker terms "testimonial injustice" (ibid). Testimonial injustice refers to a phenomenon whereby a speaker suffers a credibility deficit due to the prejudice or stereotype ascribed to the speaker's identity by hearers (mainly members of an

a benign epistemic agent who didn't set out to be offensive and engaging them in a rational discourse could be a source of education on the relevant issue.

⁴⁰See the following passage:

"You felt sorry for *her*, you felt *sorry* for her?" Mr. Gilmer [the prosecutor] seemed ready to rise to the ceiling.

The witness realized his mistake and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. But the damage was done. Below us [in the courtroom from the balcony], nobody liked Tom Robinson's answer. Mr. Gilmer paused a long time to let it sink in. (Quoted in Fricker 2007: 24; italics in original).

⁴¹Importantly, also, to further not engage the large body of existing knowledge concerning utterances we find disgusting is a form of hermeneutical injustice. For more on hermeneutical injustice, see Fricker (2007). Note that while I use the phrase "repulsive reaction", Reynolds uses the phrase "intuitive horribleness" (2024). Reynolds uses this phrase to capture instances where the positive testimony of disabled people about their disability is met with skepticism due to the intuitive tendency to find a disabled state undesirable. See Reynold (2024) for a comprehensive argument against why finding a phenomenon intuitively horrible (and acting on the basis of such intuitive horribleness) can wrong the relevant agent.

oppressive group) (ibid: 28). The wrongs of epistemic injustice are manifold: “epistemic objectification” – when the agent of epistemic injustice, S, treats the speaker as a source of information rather than an informant;⁴² “epistemic derivatization” – when S treats the speaker as an epistemic *other* or *derivatized* subject and not as a *subject-in-themselves*;⁴³ “lack of epistemic respect” – when S fails to respect the speaker in light of appropriate evidence that the speaker’s testimony is based on;⁴⁴ “relational inequality” – when S fails to relate to the speaker as an equal human.⁴⁵

Another potential epistemic drawback of epistemic disgust is that it can undermine epistemic progress by creating a pernicious epistemic echo chamber. The philosopher C. Thi Nguyen uses the term “echo chamber” to describe a phenomenon whereby other relevant voices have been actively excluded or discredited from the social epistemic structure (2020). According to Nguyen, “[M]embers of echo chambers . . . have been brought to systematically distrust all outside sources” (ibid: 141) which contradicts the social epistemic structure they rely on. In an echo chamber, other voices are heard but actively undermined (ibid: 141). If an echo chamber requires that one actively exclude or discredit other relevant voices, then epistemic disgust can also lead to creating a pernicious echo chamber.⁴⁶ Epistemic disgust can create or maintain an echo chamber that is pernicious if the repulsion a speaker’s utterance elicits in a hearer causes the hearer to actively exclude and discredit the speaker’s utterance. For example, when an agent – whose beliefs or epistemic system about gender is rooted in gender normativity – undermines transgender voices because the utterances of transgender people about their transition elicit a repulsive reaction in him. This repulsive reaction and the rejection of the content of transgender people’s utterances can cause him, the hearer, to be transphobic because of the transphobia he suffers due to the echo chamber of gender normativity that makes up his belief system. This pernicious echo chamber that is gender normativity can constitute harm to transgender people.⁴⁷

Lastly, epistemic disgust can cause us to change the subject. Instead of paying attention to evaluating the epistemic claims of the speaker in light of epistemic ideals, we start to evaluate the speaker’s moral character. The backlash the famous Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie faced after her comments about trans women in the Spring of 2017 provides a telling example. In an interview on British channel 4 News, when asked whether it matters how one arrived at being a woman – whether a trans woman is “any less of a real woman” if she also grew up “enjoying the privileges of being

⁴²See Fricker (2007). Cf. Nussbaum’s account of the wrong of sexual objectification (1995); and Kant’s account of treating people as a means to your end.

⁴³See Poulhaus (2014) and Davis (2016). Cf. de Beauvoir’s account of “othering” and Cahill’s (2011) account of “derivatization”.

⁴⁴See Pettigrew. (2023). pp. 10–12.

⁴⁵See Fraser (2024). For more on the wrongs of epistemic injustice, see Pettigrew (2023).

⁴⁶Epistemic disgust can also help maintain pernicious echo chambers. If an echo chamber requires that one actively exclude or discredit other relevant voices, then it can lead to epistemic disgust if the echo chamber the agent relies on causes him to be repulsed by other relevant voices because of the different viewpoints the other relevant voices champion. This reliance on the echo chamber allows him to uphold the beliefs available to him in his echo chamber rather than radically rebooting his belief system to escape the echo chamber that harms other relevant voices.

⁴⁷They can for instance be exposed to harm or discrimination in the health system. These can go on to contribute to transgender people experiencing poorer health care than people who maintain the sex they were assigned at birth which is in line with their gender identity. For a study, see Skuban-Eiseler *et al.* (2023). See also Zeeman *et al.* (2019).

a man” – Adichie said, “When people talk about, ‘Are trans women women?’ my feeling is trans women are trans women.”⁴⁸

Adichie’s point here is that being a trans woman is different from being a “biological woman”. For example, Adichie thinks that if one has lived in the world as a man and then switched one’s gender presentation to that of a woman, it doesn’t follow that we can equate the experience of this trans woman to that of “a woman who has lived in the world from the beginning as a woman, who has not been accorded the privileges that men have” (Adichie and Newman 2017). Adichie added later in a Facebook post: “Because the truth about societal privilege is that it isn’t about how you feel. (Anti-racist white people still benefit from race privilege in the United States). It is about how the world treats you, about the subtle and not-so-subtle things that you internalize and absorb.” Adichie didn’t explicitly imply that trans women do not face discrimination for being trans women that we shouldn’t take seriously but that the discriminatory experiences that trans women experience are quite different from those of women born female. Soon after Adichie’s comment, critics who might have found Adichie’s utterance repulsive took to social media and other platforms to criticize Adichie as implying that trans women are not “real women”. This, unfortunately, according to an article in *Vox*, is “a stereotype that transgender people constantly struggle against and find deeply offensive.”⁴⁹ Most of the online comments imply that Adichie is transphobic – a term used to refer to people who hold prejudices against transgender people. For example, Akweake Emezi, another Nigerian-born writer, wrote on Instagram that Adichie uses her comments about trans women “to mobilize her fans to amplify her hatred of trans people and her attacks on the writers who called her in.”

While I don’t propose to take a stance on whether Adichie is wrong or right, I want to call our attention to a noticeable significant change here: the repulsion some critics have for Adichie’s utterance has led to changing the subject from evaluating Adichie’s epistemic claim that trans women are trans women to evaluating whether Adichie has a character vice that is transphobia. Perhaps, a seriously sustained evaluation of Adichie’s epistemic claim, in this case, could offer a great amount of benefit. Here, however, is the issue. It seems as if solving the epistemic problem would mean we can form a unified epistemic system that individuals or groups who do not share the same viewpoints can infer from in interacting with one another and making sense of each other’s experiences in an oppressive world.

7. Potential benefits of epistemic disgust⁵⁰

When a hearer feels and expresses disgust at a speaker’s utterance, it can have some potential benefits.

7.1. *Epistemic disgust can restructure epistemic relationships*

Perceiving another person’s epistemic disgust can signal to the speaker and help them understand that something is wrong with their held belief about a particular phenomenon or topic, thereby restructuring their belief or epistemic system in light of others’ epistemic commitments. Again, consider the disgusted feminist case. If the

⁴⁸For Adichie’s interview, see “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Feminism”. *Channel 4 News*. <https://www.channel4.com/news/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-on-feminism> (Accessed 7/7/2024).

⁴⁹See Crockett (2017). <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/3/15/14910900/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-transgender-women-comments-apology> (Accessed 7/8/2024).

⁵⁰Taiwo (2022) observes similar points about vice signaling.

social media commenter is rational, that the feminist is disgusted by his comment *should* make him query if his epistemic system suffers a deficiency. The disgust the feminist feels towards the social media commenter's utterance directly challenges the epistemic relationship the man has with a (deficient) epistemic system that seems to uphold bad beliefs about women.

That an epistemic agent is epistemically disgusted by another agent's utterance should provoke a reconsideration of the contents of the utterance that leads to such a reaction of repulsion. Such reconsiderations, I believe, serve as a step toward reconstitution of the epistemic systems that might cause us to uphold bad ideologies against an individual or a social group.

7.2. Epistemic disgust can serve as the basis for social solidarity

Suppose that most vocal advocates of women's rights are women. When a man shows that the utterance of the social media commenter (in the disgusted feminist case) disgusts him, he can signal to both advocates of women's rights (the in-group) and members of the out-group (other men) that he is in solidarity with their cause – that women should be treated as humans and not as species that can be oppressed, harmed, and objectified.⁵¹ If anything, this solidarity basis can challenge injustice, oppression, discrimination, and objectification by sending a powerful message to others that certain values or principles are widely supported, and many people stand against these issues.

This solidarity basis of epistemic disgust can lead to a positive relationship between members of in-groups and the out-group. It can also serve as a step toward growing closer to people who share a similar epistemic system, and thus a similar epistemic, moral, and political commitment. Growing closer with people with similar epistemic systems can provide *strength in numbers* which can help movements or groups advocating for social change or rights: When people come together in solidarity, their collective voice and actions can have a more significant impact in challenging the status quo. The solidarity basis of epistemic disgust can also increase awareness about important issues that can influence the public and, potentially, policymakers. Sustaining such solidarity against the content of an utterance we are repulsed by can contribute to broader societal changes, thus helping us to build a more just society.

This is not an exhaustive list. Others are invited and welcomed to plug in other potential benefits. Importantly, note that I have discussed potential benefits that have to do with when a hearer feels and expresses epistemic disgust. However, epistemic disgust that is felt and not even expressed can have potential benefits for the hearer. Miller argues that disgust serves as the “gatekeeper of emotion” that keeps the undesirable away and protects “the good” believed to be inside (2004). Epistemic disgust can function in the same way. For example, epistemic disgust can help one: (i) maintain her epistemic purity – if S's epistemic disgust causes S to distance herself from ideas or beliefs that are deemed contaminant, epistemic disgust can help S maintain the purity of her epistemic system; and (ii) foster epistemic integrity – if S's epistemic disgust causes her to reject utterances that are unreliable or harmful, it can help to foster more accurate and credible knowledge; and among many others.

⁵¹Well, a critic might say, mere disagreement can also perform this function. However, a feature can be characteristic of two concepts.

8. Conclusion

Hearing a speaker's utterance often has an effect on our beliefs. But we also have sub-rational epistemic reactions to a speaker's utterance, or so I have argued. Disgust is one of the sub-rational epistemic reactions a speaker's utterance can elicit in us. That is, sometimes we are repulsed by a speaker's utterance. When we are repulsed by a speaker's utterance, we *immediately* reject it from contributing to our epistemic system. The philosophical literature has overlooked this phenomenon. I have proposed a concept I term "epistemic disgust" to explain this sub-rational epistemic reaction of repulsion some speakers' utterances elicit in us.

This new theory of epistemic disgust draws out a lot of questions about the theory itself and I hope it starts an inquiry into the repulsive reaction humans have toward a speaker's utterance which causes them to reject the speaker's utterance from contributing to their epistemic system. I have signposted some questions in my footnotes but future questions to investigate also include what theorizing about a concept of epistemic disgust would look like. What kind of interplay between emotional reactions and propositional attitudes does epistemic disgust involve? Is it an epistemic virtue or vice? Is feeling epistemic disgust morally problematic? While I continue to look into these questions myself, I implore philosophers, cognitive scientists, political scientists, and sociologists, among many others to take up these questions so we can understand this phenomenon better.

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