

SOCIAL PREJUDICES AND EMOTION OF DISGUST

Renáta Kišoňová

Comenius University, Faculty of Law, Department of Theory of Law and Philosophy of Law,
Slovakia

Abstract

The paper focuses on the relationship among prejudices in social life and the moral and social emotion of disgust. What are the mechanisms which do relate and connect prejudice and our experience of disgust? I will try to discuss that connection within etymology of studied terms and within context from contemporary literature and the novel Vegetarian. Experience of disgust strongly correlates with experience of prejudice according to contemporary researchers from the field of evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology, environmental biology and other research areas focused on human social behavior.

Key words: *prejudice, moral emotion of disgust, novel Vegetarian, disgusting, emotions*

„...it's the smell.” “The smell?” “The meat smell. Your body smells of meat.” This was just too ridiculous for words.“

(Kang, 2015, p. 17)

INTRODUCTION

The aim of submitted paper is to deal with relation of social prejudices and moral emotion of disgust. How can be prejudice related to disgust, human evolutionarily rooted mechanism? I am going to discuss the term prejudice firstly and then to find ties between moral emotions and prejudicial behavior. The submitted paper focuses on the relationship among prejudices in social life and the moral and social emotion of disgust. What are the mechanisms which do relate and connect prejudice and our experience of disgust? I will try to discuss that connection within etymology of studied terms and within context from contemporary literature and the novel Vegetarian. Experience of disgust strongly correlates with experience of prejudice according to contemporary researchers from the field of evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology, environmental biology and other research areas focused on human social behavior. I will work except analyses of Vegetarian with Shakespeare's plays which reflect the topic of prejudices and disgust. I am also going to focus on contemporary cognitive and social psychology and philosophical point of view, of Adorno and Umberto Eco.

NOVEL VEGETARIAN BY HAN KANG

There is a wonderful metaphorical example of connectedness between prejudice and emotion of disgust in novel by Korean author Han Kang The Vegetarian. I will briefly introduce the author in order to show focusing on the relationship between emotions and social behavior in her work. Han Kang was born in Gwangju in 1970, she won the 25th Korean Novel Award with the novel Baby Buddha in 1999, was awarded Manhae literary prize for Human Acts in 2014, novel The Vegetarian won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. Han Kang currently works as a professor in the Department of Creative Writing at the Seoul Institute of the Arts. The Vegetarian is fable-like in structure. It centers on the vivid self-destruction of a single human body. That body belongs to a housewife named Yeong-hye, who is described by her husband as “completely unremarkable in every way” (Kang, 2015, 10) and she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness.” (Kang, 2015, 10) For Mr. Cheong, who has “always inclined to the middle course in life,” (Kang, 2015 10) this is part of her appeal.

“The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground,” (Kang 2015) Yeong-hye’s husband says. Yeong-hye’s decision not to eat meat is received as an appalling rebuke by her entire family, especially her father, a Vietnam War veteran whose violent tendencies suggest the traumas of the battlefield. During a family meal, orchestrated as an intervention of sorts, he attempts to shove a piece of sweet-and-sour pork down his daughter’s throat. In response, Yeong-hye slits her wrist as the entire family watches in horror. Finally, she is institutionalized. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/15/han-kang-and-the-complexity-of-translation>).

Descriptions of Yeong-hye’s disgust of meat and actually most foods succeeded delineate very authentically, physically, sensually. „Along bamboo sticks trug with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there’s no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood-soaked clothes sucked onto my skin.” (Kang 2015, 14). The reader may literally feel, experience and undergo disgusting perceptions which are also reflected on his or her face. Yeong-hye suffers whole story with prejudices of her vicinity who cannot (and not even try) to understand her aversion to meat. She is condemned to loneliness and misunderstanding because of her otherness. Disgust is emotion which experiences Yeon-hye but it is also moral and social disgust which experience her family regarding her behavior and her decision not to eat meat. I suppose that also prejudice is present in this novel on the both sides: Yeong-hye experiences prejudices related to her vicinity and vice versa. And this experiencing of mutual disgust is experienced also by reader very emotionally.

EXPERIENCE OF DISGUST

As Paul Ekman says, the most easily recognizable sign of disgust is the wrinkling of the nose. (Ekman, 2007). He also mentioned lowered eyebrows, wrinkling on the side and bridge on the nose, upper lip is raised in an inverted U, lower lip raised and slightly protruding. (Ekman, 2007) Terminology shows to the Greek term *chanuo*, which can be translated as chipping away, the noun *chnoos* is translated as foam, sediment, mud, dust. The meaning of the expression apparently developed in the direction of "that which is rubbed off", broken, rotten, that which arouses resistance.

Jean Paul Sartre gave the concept of disgust the meaning of a life feeling, the main character of the novel *Nausea* experiences an existential grip of disgust. Sartre's description also focuses on the physical side of that feeling: „Things are very bad: I have it, the filth, the Nausea. And this time it is new: it caught me in a cafe. Until now cafes were my only refuge because they were full of people and well lighted: now there won't even be that anymore; when I am run to earth in my room, I shan't know where to go... The Nausea is not inside me: I feel it out there in the wall, in the suspenders, everywhere around me. It makes itself one with the cafe, I am the one who is within it.” (Sartre, 1964, p. 16)

Disgust is a response to physical objects, to social violations and social prejudice may be one of defend mechanism. „Eating an insect might disgust you, but it needn’t have any relation to your moral beliefs, either as an effect or as a cause. However, when there is a connection between a moral belief and repugnance, the emotion may be elicited by the belief, not the other way around.” (May, 2020, p.156)

The most discussed and most researched area of emotions includes the problem of cultural conditionality. For example, as mentioned by Parkinson, Fischer, Manstead (2005) – English language contains approximately 2000 words that express emotions, Dutch around 1500, Taiwanese Chinese about 750 and Malay 230.

Diverse cultures understand and express emotions differently; they are related to different situations. These differences are given by cultural traditions, rituals, values, expectations, etc. Examination of cultural conditionality of emotions does not mean only search for emotions that are culturally specific, but also those that occur universally across all cultures. (Slaměnik, 2011) In the 1970s, the research of cultural conditionality of emotions relied mainly on allegations by Ekman and Izard, who derived the universality of emotion from facial expressions. These were followed by the dictionary-based studies – as most linguistic analyses confirm that in all languages there are simple words expressing emotions – fear, anger, sadness, joy, etc., although they may have shifted meanings.

Ethnographer C. Lutz argues that most languages contain words for love, joy, fear, anger and sadness in their lexicology. Lutz also looked at social and cultural conditionality of emotions that are unknown to Western culture. She conducted research on a small atoll in the Pacific Ocean, where the Ifaluk tribe lives (about 430 people). The tribe uses the word *fago*, which may be translated, according to the ethnographer, as compassion-love-anger. The word *fago* actually represents a kind of concern for others. Parents consistently lead descendants to perceive and to experience situations that in adults evoke the *fago* emotion. (Slaměnik, 2011)

The universal function of disgust is to get away from, block off, or eliminate something offensive, toxic or contaminating (Ekman, 2003). Prejudice serves as an organon for blocking off. The research team around Florian van Leeuwen, Yoel Inbar and others reported a relation between pathogen-avoidance motivations and prejudice toward various social group and they have found out and interpret the relation between disgust sensitivity and antigay attitudes for example. (van Leeuwen, 2022) "One evolutionary benefit of disgust is to keep us away from or remove things potentially dangerous or damaging to keep us safe and healthy (e.g., not eating something putrid, staying away from open sores to avoid catching an infection or disease, avoiding interactions with "morally tainted" people)" (Ekman 2003, p. 66-68). Disgust can be also dangerous. Many societies teach the avoidance of certain groups of people deemed physically or morally disgusting and, thus, can be a driving force in dehumanizing and degrading others, which may reach to superiority, prejudices and other social deviations.

On the other hand, disgust can be suppressed. While witnessing gross bodily functions like bleeding, defecating, vomiting etc. in others often evokes disgust, this reaction is suspended when it is someone with whom we are related, or close. „Intimacy lowers the threshold for what we consider disgusting. So, while we still may feel some degree of disgust, it is reduced enough that we are able to help those we care about. Now, rather than try to get away, we are called to reduce the suffering of the loved one (e.g., changing a baby's diaper or taking care of a sick family member). This suspension of disgust establishes intimacy and may even strengthen love and community." (Ekman 2003, p.66-68)

Not every vegetarian (for example) becomes disgusted by meat, but for those who have moral reasons, there is empirical evidence, that they are more disgusted by meat than those who are vegetarians for health benefits. The emotional response is here related to the moral judgement by following it. (May, 2020: 157). Joshua May describes not only vegetarians but smokers as well. There are many people disgusted by cigarette smoke. There is evidence, according to May, that people in United States become more disgusted by cigarettes after forming the belief, that it is a morally questionable habit and industry to support. (Rozin, Singh, 1999, May, 2020, p.158).

When we come back to novel Vegetarian, prejudices against main character are obvious in the whole family. They are not able to eliminate them and disaster must be completed.

Yeong-hye has stayed in hospital, withered to sixty-six pounds. Refusing to speak or to accept food in any form, she has spent much of her time attempting to imitate a tree: doing handstands and basking in the sun. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/15/han-kang-and-the-complexity-of-translation>)

THE TERM PREJUDICE

When we would like to understand the notion prejudice and its meaning we should start with its etymology. The roots of the word comes from Old French prejudice "a prejudice, prejudgment; damage", appearing in thirteenth century and directly from Medieval Latin prejudicium "injustice," from Latin praeiudicium "prior judgment, judicial examination before trial; damage, harm," from prae- "before" iudicium "judgment," from iudex. (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/prejudice>). In order to understand the term prejudice completely, we have to split it on prefix „pre“ and the stem „judge“. The term „pre“ has been word-forming element meaning "before," from Old French pre- and Medieval Latin pre-, both from Latin prae "before in time or place," pre, in Sanskrit pare meant "thereupon," in Greek parai "at," in Old Church Slavonic pri "at," in Gothic faura, in Old English fore "before". The notion „judge“ comes from fourteenth century and meant "public officer

appointed to administer the law" also judge-man; from Old French juge, from Latin iudex "one who declares the law" (i tis source also of Spanish juez, or Italian giudice), a compound of ius "right, law". (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/prejudice>)

Extended from late fourteenth century to persons to decide any sort of contest; from 1550s as "one qualified to pronounce opinion." In Jewish history, it refers to a war leader vested with temporary power (as in Book of Judges), from Latin iudex being used to translate Hebrew shophet. For example, when it comes again to a metaphor from literature, Shakespearean Othello, shaped by his "commitment to absolute determinations of right and wrong, guilt and innocence" seems to be a black man, who does not suffer from the inferiority complex that is described in the theoretical part of this paper, even though he is aware of his 'otherness', which alienates him from the Venetian society. The Moor is convinced that his service outweighs his skin color, even when being 'attacked' by Desdemona's desperate father. Or in Shakespeare's play The Tempest we can read about Caliban's appearance. He is not on the evidence of the text, intended to resemble a monstrous hybrid, he has human arms in spite of Trinculo's working assumption that he is a fish with fins:

„What have we here -- a man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish. He smells like a fish... A strange fish. Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday-fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man... Legged like a man, and his fins like arms. Warm o'my troth -- I do now let loose my opinion, hold it no longer: this is no fish but an islander that hath lately suffered by a thunderbolt.“ (Shakespeare, 1999)

PREJUDICES IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

Prejudice could be simply characterized as previously formed attitude towards an object, which is manifested regardless of the individuality of the object. An individual does not consider the bias in the assessment of other persons any alternative explanation; the results of his interpersonal evaluations are predetermined. (Hayes, 1998)

I will focus on social prejudice, present in the society and has very negative consequences, is ethnic prejudice. Psychologist Allport described five development stages of ethnic prejudice that exist in a society that is inclined toward racism:

1. slander (hostile speech, racist propaganda, etc.)
2. isolation (separation of the ethnic group from the majority in society)
3. discrimination (denial of civil rights)
4. physical assault (violence against persons or property)
5. eradication (violence against a whole group)

K. Lorenz saw the aggression associated with prejudice as a basic and necessary instinct related to the protection of the territory. (Lorenz, 2003). Likewise, prejudice against outside groups was interpreted by Dawkins (1989), who argued that prejudice is a kind of biological instinct that compels individuals to protect fellows that share their genes. This theory also corresponds with the concept of prejudice in socio-biology by E.O.Wilson, which he based on the observation of ant communities. Wilson emphasized the importance of kin selection over other factors. (Hayes, 1998)

CONCLUSION

Philosopher and sociologist T.W. Adorno argued that the basis of prejudice is a certain type of personality and upbringing that makes certain types of people to incline towards prejudice against outside groups. These are primarily people whose parents enforce harsh discipline that caused the child's aggressive feelings, but it also did not allow the child to express these feelings so they internalized and were expressed towards other objects. Particularly against minority groups and all people who are socially different. Umberto Eco mentioned prejudices as intolerance with biological origin. Animals

show it as territoriality and it is based (not only in animal realm, but in human as well) on superficial emotional reactions. We hate those who seem to be different because of other skin color, because of eating frogs, garlic, pigs, because of tattooing...And in addition to perception of difference we experience physical disgust. (Eco, 2021)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the Contract no. APVV-19-0166.

REFERENCES

- Kang, Han.: Vegetarian. Hogarth, 2015.
<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/15/han-kang-and-the-complexity-of-translation>>
- Ekman Paul, Wallace V. Friesen 2003, Unmasking the Face: A Guide to Recognizing Emotions from Facial Clues, ISHK.
- Sartre, J. P.: Nausea. New Directions Publishing, 1964.
- Van Leeuwen et al.: Disgust sensitivity relates to attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women across 31 nations, In: Sage Journals, 2022.
- Slaměník, I.: Emoce a interpersonální vztahy. Praha, Grada, 2011.
- Parkinson, B., Fischer, A.H., Manstead, A.S.R.: Emotion In Social Relations: Cultural, Group, and Interpersonal Processes. Psychology Press, 2005.
- May, J.: The Limits of Appealing to Disgust. Rowman and Littlefield International Ltd, 2020.
- Rozin, P., Singh, L.: The moralization of cigarette smoking in the United States. Journal of Consumer Psychology 8 (3), 321-37. 1999.
<<https://www.etymonline.com/word/prejudice>>
- The Tempest, Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson, 1999), 73-124.
- Hayes N.: Základy sociální psychologie. Praha: Portál, 1998.
- Dawkins, R.: The Selfish Gene. Oxford Paperbacks, 1989.
- Lorenz, K.: Takzvané zlo. Praha: Academia, 2003.
- Eco, U.: Migrace a nesnášenlivost. Věčný fašismus. Argo, 2021.