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Contamination and Contagion

A particularly important feature of contagion, paralleled by disgust, is the journey from the physical to the moral. Although moral contagion is often indelible, it is sometimes treated as if it is physical.

—Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark McCauley

1.

In his book *Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin equated disgust with *distaste*. This is reasonable; the Latin origins of the word *disgust* mean "to taste bad."

But disgust is more than simple distaste. Many things taste bad but are not disgusting, like coffee or lemons. Generally speaking, disgust involves the feeling of *revulsion*, a visceral, almost nauseous, response. And this revulsion is very often triggered by a judgment or appraisal of contamination or pollution. A foodstuff might be perfectly edible and attractive but if it comes into contact with a polluting influence (e.g., the proverbial fly in one's soup) the food is "ruined" and the prospect of eating it becomes disgusting.

In short, beyond monitoring the boundary of the body and rejecting objectionable objects from the body, disgust also monitors

the environment, marking sources of contamination and pollution.[1] Many of these stimuli are legitimate vectors for disease (e.g., feces) while others are the product of our learning histories (e.g., food aversions due to food poisoning). However, many sources of contamination are driven by culture and have little or nothing to do with food. A behavior might be experienced as a pollutant to a person's soul, soiling our conscience. A person's presence in the church might be experienced as offensive or inappropriate. In short, as we noted in the last chapter, although contamination monitoring is at root healthy and adaptive, we should worry when judgments of contamination are extended into the religious, moral, and social domains. Given that contamination appraisals are built atop a more primitive food-aversion system we should worry about certain psychological dynamics (e.g., revulsion), perfectly legitimate in the domain of food choice, being imported into the life of the church. Disgust and contamination are powerfully aversive experiences and we should be wary when these experiences are directed toward others or the self. However, to effectively monitor and thwart contamination appraisals it will be important for us to come to grips with the unique "logic" of contagion and pollution. How does defilement work?

2.

Imagine I offer you a glass of juice. But before I hand the glass over to you I drop a cockroach in the juice, stir it around, and then remove the bug from the glass. Will you drink the juice? Most people don't. There is nothing surprising in this reaction. It's a simple case of contamination psychology at work. The bug—the contaminating object—has come into contact with the foodstuff and this ruins the juice. After contact with the bug the juice is judged as impure, unclean, polluted, and contaminated.

But here is where things start to get interesting. In his laboratory, Paul Rozin has gone on to ask some additional questions regarding the ruined glass of juice. Of course you won't drink the juice after a bug has been swirled around in it, but what if we filtered the

1. Rozin et al., "Disgust," 637–53.

juice through one of those filters that are used to purify tap water? Would you drink the juice after this filtering? What if we filtered the juice, boiled it, and filtered it again? Would you drink the juice then? Interestingly, most people still refuse to drink the juice despite knowing, rationally speaking, that the boiled and filtered juice is purer than most tap water. Intellectually, people understand that the boiled and filtered juice is clean. The juice has been sanitized before their very eyes. And yet people still reject the juice. Even while they admit the illogical nature of their response.

What Rozin's research helps us see, vividly so, is that judgments of contamination play by their own rules. And these rules are very often contrary and impervious to logic and reason. Rationally, I judge the juice as sanitized. At the same time a contamination-based appraisal is also at work. This appraisal continues to judge the juice as unfit to drink. Reason and contamination psychology have come into conflict.

This facet of disgust psychology, that it plays by its own rules, will prove important in the chapters to come. For example, when understandings of purity, sin, salvation, and holiness are regulated or influenced by disgust psychology we unwittingly import a contamination-based reasoning into the life of the church. And, as we have just seen, contamination-based reasoning, being governed by a unique set of rules, is often immune to reason and rationality.

3.

What are the rules governing judgments of contamination? How does the logic of contamination work? (And to be clear, the phrase "contamination logic" is using the word "logic" to speak about the internal mechanics and rules that govern contamination judgments. The logic here is internal to the system, the functioning of its inner workings. From the outside, as mentioned above, contamination appraisals can be quite illogical when assessed by the standards of formal reasoning and rationality. Externally, judgments of contamination are oftentimes bizarre and irrational.)

Broadly speaking, judgments of contamination demonstrate a logic very similar to the logic one observes in what is known as

sympathetic magic.[2] Sympathetic magic is an anthropological term that has been used to characterize a variety of primitive beliefs about how spiritual or magical artifacts and rituals might have effects upon other objects. Take, as an example, the magical idea of *similarity* seen in the voodoo doll. According to the logic of sympathetic magic, similarity creates a "connection" between two objects. Thus the voodoo doll is made to look like the person I want to curse. The similarity between the doll and target is judged to be important for the creation of a causal link.

It was once assumed that sympathetic magic only characterized the religion and spirituality of primitive peoples. Modern scientific people were believed to be immune to the fanciful reasoning observed in primitive magic. Logically we moderns know that, just because a doll looks like a person, there is no reason to assume a causal connection between the two. But as recent psychological research has repeatedly shown, modern scientifically literate people often make judgments of just this sort. And, as we will also see in later chapters, this "magical thinking" is very often carried over into the life of the church.

To illustrate magical thinking at work in modern people consider some other examples from Paul Rozin's laboratory. Rozin has offered people brownies baked to look like doggie poop. Or asked people to drink lemonade from a never-been-used and sterilized bedpan. And time after time, people refuse to eat or drink. Rationally, the participants know that what looks like dog poop is actually a brownie. Rationally, they know that the yellow liquid is lemonade, not urine. But the brownie *looks like* dog poop and the lemonade *looks like* urine. And that's enough to trigger disgust. Even though we know that this response is irrational.

In short, something like the magical law of similarity appears to be operative. If two things look similar our mind has trouble separating them. Even if, logically, we know the truth of the matter. Magical thinking tends to override reason.

Take, as another example, the magical notion of *contact*. The voodoo doll must involve more than similarity. Somehow the doll and the target must make contact. This is often accomplished by taking something from the target (e.g., hair) and incorporating it into the

2. Nemeroff and Rozin, "Makings of the Magical Mind," 1–34.

doll. This contact creates a connection that the voodoo practitioner hopes to exploit.

Like with the law of similarity, we see this law of contact also at work in disgust and contamination responses. Consider again the cockroach and the juice. Why will we not drink the juice after it has been sanitized? Our feelings seem to be governed by the magical law of contact. That is, once a connection is made between the cockroach and the juice they forever remain in contact. The rule seems to be "once in contact, always in contact."

Now a theologian might be wondering at this point: what do cockroaches in juice or poop-shaped brownies have to do with the life of the church? That's a good question. The answer is that the magical thinking found in contamination judgments is regularly imported into the moral, social, and religious domains. To illustrate this, consider another experiment conducted by Paul Rozin regarding how people reason about evil.

Imagine I take out of my closet an old cardboard box. I want to show you something inside the box. I open the box and pull out a sweater. The sweater is old and somewhat ratty. It hasn't been washed. I tell you that I was given this sweater by my grandfather who had an interest in World War II memorabilia. My grandfather acquired this sweater as a part of his collection. This sweater was owned and worn by Hitler. It's from his actual wardrobe. After Hitler's death many former Nazis took mementos from Hitler's life. Apparently, there is a thriving black market trade for authentic artifacts or articles once owned, used, or worn by Hitler. The sweater I'm showing you was worn by Hitler the week before his suicide. It hasn't been washed since. You can still see his sweat stains.

Would you, I ask, like to put the sweater on?

Research has shown that many people refuse to try the sweater on. More, people report discomfort being near or in the same room with the sweater. A wicked fog surrounds the object and we want to avoid contact with it.

What studies like this reveal is that people tend to think about evil as if it were a virus, a disease, or a contagion. Evil is an *object* that can seep out of Hitler, into the sweater, and, by implication, into you if you try the sweater on. Evil is sticky and contagious. So we stay away.

What we see in this example is how disgust psychology regulates how we reason about and experience aspects of the moral universe. Disgust psychology prompts us to think about evil as if it were a virus or a polluting object. When we do this the logic of contamination is imported into moral discourse and judgment. For example, as noted earlier, we begin to worry about *contact*. In the domain of food aversion contact with a polluting object is a legitimate concern. But fears concerning contact might not be appropriate or logical in dealing with moral issues or social groups. Worse, a fear of contact might promote antisocial behavior (e.g., social exclusion) on our part.

The example of Hitler might sound extreme, but consider another study done by Paul Rozin, Maureen Markwith, and Clark McCauley.[3] In this study the researchers observed that many people don't want to wear sweaters previously owned by homosexual persons, or even lie down in the same hotel bed if a homosexual person was the previous night's occupant. In short, just about any behavior judged to be sin could activate disgust psychology, subsequently importing contamination logic (e.g., contact fears) into the life of the church.

We find magical thinking at work in Matthew 9. If sin is "contagious," extending hospitality becomes impossible. This is the psychological dynamic at the heart of the conflict in Matthew 9. What worries the Pharisees is Jesus' *contact* with sinners. This worry over *proximity* is symptomatic of the magical thinking imported into the religious domain through the psychology of disgust.

Let's pause here and update our list of features that characterize disgust psychology. We've already noted the boundary monitoring, expulsive, and promiscuous aspects of disgust. We can now add a fourth feature to our list:

1. *A Boundary Psychology*: Disgust is a system that monitors *boundaries*. Disgust regulates the act of incorporation and inclusion.
2. *Expulsive*: Disgust is a violently *expulsive* mechanism. In mild forms disgust simply prompts *withdrawal* and *avoidance*. In stronger forms disgust involves violent *rejection, expulsion,* or *elimination*.

3. Rozin et al., "Sensitivity to Indirect Contacts," 495–505.

3. *Promiscuous*: Due to disgust's developmental peculiarities (i.e., its sensitive period), culture can link disgust to a variety of stimuli, many unrelated to food. Consequently, disgust is often found regulating moral, social, and religious experiences.
4. *Magical Thinking*: The contamination appraisals involved in disgust are characterized by magical thinking, which overrides reason and logic. Consequently, when disgust regulates moral, social, or religious experience magical thinking is unwittingly imported into the life of the church.

3.

The logic of contamination is called "magical" because it makes causal judgments that defy the laws of physics. That isn't to say that magical thinking has no basis in reality or adaptive value. Generally speaking, if a foodstuff makes contact with or is in close physical proximity to a known pollutant we should, from an adaptive stance, be wary about eating the food. Contact is a legitimate heuristic in thinking about contagion and contamination. The problem comes when the logic of "contact" begins to be applied in situations where it shouldn't apply.

To this point we've mainly focused on the notion of contact in contamination judgments. But there are other features of contamination logic that are important to consider in light of the chapters to come. And as with the judgment of contact, each of these aspects of contamination logic is problematic when imported into the moral, social, and religious domains.

I'd like to focus on four principles of contagion as have been described by Paul Rozin and his colleagues:

1. *Contact*: Contamination is caused by contact or physical proximity.
2. *Dose Insensitivity*: Minimal, even micro, amounts of the pollutant confer harm.
3. *Permanence*: Once deemed contaminated nothing can be done to rehabilitate or purify the object.

4. *Negativity Dominance*: When a pollutant and a pure object come into contact the pollutant is "stronger" and ruins the pure object. The pure object doesn't render the pollutant acceptable or palatable.[4]

We've already seen the moral problems caused by the logic of contact. Let's briefly discuss the problems associated with the other facets of contamination logic from our list.

Dose insensitivity is the appraisal that minute amounts of a pollutant will create contamination. That is, the "dose" can be little or large and it doesn't matter. The classic phrase in the literature is, "A drop of urine in a bottle of wine will ruin the bottle of wine. But a drop of wine in a bottle of urine will do nothing to make the urine drinkable."[5] To sharpen this point, imagine a whole swimming pool of clean wine. On the far end you see me drop in a teaspoon of urine. Has the wine in the pool become polluted? Most say yes. Would you drink a bottle of wine from the pool? Probably not.

The point here is that the "logic" of dose insensitivity implies that even very small "pollutants" can have catastrophic effects. As illustrations, consider how dose insensitivity governs how people reason in the following situations:

1. Emotional reactions to small, seemingly insignificant, changes in worship practices.
2. The eliminationist anti-Semitism of the Nazi Final Solution.
3. Neighborhood outrage when a public playground is found to have trace (but harmless) amounts of toxins in the ground soil.

In each of these situations we find that dose insensitivity creates binary judgments. That is, we don't think of something as being "a little" contaminated. "Dosage" is irrelevant. A small amount of contamination doesn't compute. Something either is contaminated or it's not. Consider the examples. In my church tradition small changes to worship practices, seemingly irrelevant, became huge sources of conflict. Like a drop of urine in a bottle of wine the small change—the polluting influence—ruined the acceptability of the worship. Changes to worship were dose insensitive.

4. Rozin et al., "Operation of the Laws," 703–12.
5. Rozin and Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust," 23–41.

Consider also how dose insensitivity drives the logic of ethnic cleansing. If, as the Nazi's believed, Jews were polluting influences then dose insensitivity demanded complete elimination and extermination. The existence of a single Jew was too much to stand.

Finally, consider how dose insensitivity affects policy. Our world is never hazard free. We are willing to live with some acceptable level of risk. We all, for example, drive cars on the road. But certain social and policy issues activate contamination judgments. When this happens the logic of dose insensitivity is imported into the discussion. For example, how much toxin is tolerable in the groundsoil of a child's playground? Even asking the question seems immoral. The obvious answer, given dose insensitivity logic, is none, zero percent. And yet a "clean up" goal of zero percent might not be physically or economically feasible.

In each of these examples—religious, social, political—we see how dose insensitivity logic can produce dysfunction. And yet few of us are aware of the moment when dose insensitivity logic has been imported into our conversation, framing how we see the world.

Consider next the contamination attribution of *permanence*. The judgment of permanence is characterized by the attribution that once an object becomes contaminated, nothing can be done to rehabilitate the object. Recall the bug in the juice experiments. Once the juice was judged to be contaminated, nothing could be done to rehabilitate the juice, to make it drinkable again. Once polluted, always polluted.

The judgment of permanence will be important in Part 2 when we consider sins that are uniquely structured by purity metaphors. As we will see, when moral infractions are governed by a contamination logic the attribution of permanence—once polluted, always polluted—is imported into the sin experience. Such sins become emotionally traumatic due to the judgment that *permanent, non-rehabilitative ruin* has occurred. As a consequence, these "contamination sins" carry an enormous load of guilt, shame, and self-loathing within the church. After these sins people may "give up," morally speaking, as some "pure" moral state or status has been irrevocably lost or ruined. Think of the way a teenager, motivated by the metaphor of "sexual purity," might respond to the loss of virginity. Or how an alcoholic might respond to "falling off the wagon" with one drink. In light of the attribution of permanence people in these circumstances might

just throw in the towel, morally speaking, and continue to have sex or proceed to the next drink. If total ruin has occurred, then, according to the dose insensitivity logic, more of the same isn't going to make anything worse.

Finally, consider the attribute of *negativity dominance*. The judgment of negativity dominance places all the power on the side of the pollutant. If I touch (apologies for the example I'm about to use) some feces to your cheeseburger the cheeseburger gets ruined, permanently (see above). Importantly, the cheeseburger doesn't make the feces suddenly scrumptious. When the pure and the polluted come into contact the pollutant is the more powerful force. The negative dominates over the positive.

Negativity dominance has important missional implications for the church. For example, notice how negativity dominance is at work in Matthew 9. The Pharisees never once consider the fact that the contact between Jesus and the sinners might have a purifying, redemptive, and cleansing effect upon the sinners. Why not? The logic of contamination simply doesn't work that way. The logic of contamination has the power of the negative dominating over the positive. Jesus doesn't purify the sinners. The sinners make Jesus unclean.

Negativity dominance is problematic in the life of the church because, in the missional moment, when the church makes contact with the world, the power sits firmly with the world as the location of impurity. According to the logic of negativity dominance, contact with the world defiles the *church*. Given this logic the only move open to the church is withdrawal and quarantine, separation from the world. In short, many missional failures are simply the product of the church following the intuitive logic of disgust psychology.

What is striking about the gospel accounts is how Jesus reverses negativity dominance. Jesus is, to coin a term, *positivity dominant*. Contact with Jesus purifies. A missional church embraces this reversal, following Jesus into the world without fears of contamination. But it is important to note that this is a deeply counterintuitive position to take. Nothing in our experience suggests that this should be the case. The missional church will always be swimming against the tide of disgust psychology, always tempted to separate, withdraw, and quarantine.