Research Article

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Stanley Cavell on the "Disgusting Child": Ordinary Aesthetics and the Mental Health Crisis in Schools

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Abstract: This article explores Stanley Cavell's ordinary aesthetics through a close reading of one passage in *The Claim of Reason*. This close reading leads to the suggestion that educating our aesthetic sense and responsiveness has ethical implications, especially as these relate to the mental health crisis in schools. The article draws implications for individuals in caring relationships with young people, suggesting that Cavell's thinking on ordinary aesthetics is a powerful tool in our time.

Keywords: Stanley Cavell, Toni Morrison, mental health crisis, philosophy of education

The section "Normal and Natural" in Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* begins with a discussion of the anxiety adults feel when it dawns on them that young people learn far more than an adult teaches – sanctions and wishes to pass on to the next generation – and the section ends with the much-discussed line that "philosophy becomes the education of grownups."[1] In between, Cavell touches, investigates, and connects concepts and thinkers in a breathtaking fashion. In fact, this section is so densely packed with ideas and allusions that it is easy to overlook an aspect of the section that I take to be particularly interesting.[2] Near the end of the section, Cavell briefly discusses the example of a "disgusting child."[3] In this article, I take up this example, arguing that it offers a particularly useful lens through which we might view the significance that ordinary aesthetics plays in Cavell's thinking and the ways that ordinary aesthetics connects to one aspect of our moral and ethical lives: how we might address what is now being labeled a mental health crisis in schools.[4] Along the way, I briefly discuss Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* to further ground Cavell's example.

A word of clarification is at the outset. Disgusting is a strong word that Cavell uses very intentionally to describe what I read to be a visceral aesthetic reaction a community has toward a child. As I will argue below, I don't take this aesthetic reaction to be a response to an unchanging property of the child, as if a community is reacting to a natural property of the child. Rather, Cavell invites us to consider what it is about our experience of the world – our upbringing, our repressed pains from childhood, our rejected hopes

1 Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 125. For an example of some of the thinking this line originated, see Saito and Standish, *Stanley Cavell*.

2 And as readers of Cavell know, it is important to accredit what one finds interesting. For an excellent discussion, see Laugier, "What Matters;" and Laugier, "Matter and Mind."

3 Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 123 ff.

4 For a discussion, see Murthy, *Protecting Youth*.

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forged in childhood[5] – that would cause us to, almost as a matter of course, respond to any child as if that child were disgusting. The visceral feeling of disgust is a difficult emotion because it strikes me as such an ordinary one that combines aesthetic and ethical dimensions.[6] It is painful to investigate disgust, and in lieu of the pain of philosophical investigation and interrogation of disgust, it is tempting to claim that our feeling of disgust is natural so we can – as it were – put the reaction to bed, fixing it as beyond the reach of change. But an education of grownups, or an important aspect of undergoing this education, is troubling our fixed understanding, risking conversion and the new angles of vision and ways of responding to the world that come with it. It is to this difficult investigation of disgust that I turn to now.

1 Disgusting: Aesthetic and Ethical Dimensions

It is not obvious that an education of grownups must go through a confrontation with a disgusting child, but the concept of disgust at the sight of a child offers a striking example of why it matters that children learn more than we set out to teach them. When a child asks an honest question about their self-worth, it is tempting for adults to offer a consoling myth in the place of honest engagement with the child's heartfelt concern. A child may wonder why some kids have many friends while others get ignored and shunned, and in the place of wrestling with this reality, the adults in the child's life silence these concerns with conversation-stopping cliches about how every child is special. But children know better than they are taught. They know that some children aren't played with, and they know that the same adults who say that every child is special can be especially cruel to children who are regularly shunned. Instead of responding to what is special in each child, adults teach children, or at least children learn from adults, that they don't belong. When this happens enough, when a child passes from one grade in school to the next and find that they are never treated kindly, they may want to believe that they live in a world where they are special, but they know they feel nothing but the disgust of those around them. This can then cause the child to believe that they are naturally disgusting, and instead of questioning a world where a child can come to believe this about themselves, adults erase their complicity in causing a child to learn this about themselves and our world, and adults become further complicit in failing to question the teaching that some of us are just naturally disgusting, and that disgust is a natural response to this reality.

To undergo an education, adults must be troubled that a child could find themselves disgusting and be further troubled by the possibility that they are somehow complicit in teaching this. It is an avoidance of this education to believe that some of us are just naturally disgusting. But to acknowledge our complicity would cause us to have to question our fundamental responsiveness to the world. Disgust has aesthetic and ethical dimensions, and it feels close to the core of ourselves. Our sense of the disgusting comes to feel very much *our own*, and this is why being disgusted by another person can come to feel natural, unavoidable, and foregone given the person we are. But what if our aesthetic sense, in its very ordinary forms of what we find disgusting and attractive, aren't quite mine? What if I learned to find something or someone disgusting as a way of avoiding questions about my self-worth? Or to turn Descartes skeptical questions in a different direction, we might wonder, even though I think I am beautiful because I am told so by someone who claims to love me, who is to say that I am not delusional and that everyone who calls me beautiful is just play-acting? As a way of silencing this form of skepticism, I project my fears and my hurts externally. And if we all happen to find it easy to project our fears and hurts onto the same person, then that person can become disgusting, making us less disgusting in the process. When this happens, it can come to pass that I have a bit more faith in my own worth when I am supported in my belief, when my community believes, that someone else is disgusting.

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5 For a discussion of Cavell and Diamond on repressing the child and the hurts of childhood, see Frank, "Stanley Cavell."
6 The use of difficult is meant to echo Diamond, "Difficulty." For a discussion of Diamond's thinking on difficulties of reality as they connect to the mental health crisis, see Farrell and Mahon, "Understanding Student."

Here is where Toni Morrison's book *The Bluest Eye* becomes particularly instructive. At the heart of the story is Pecola Breedlove, a girl who others despise as ugly and who comes to view herself as ugly, especially when measured against the blue eyes of Shirley Temple and Mary Jane (from candy wrappers). One reason Morrison wrote the novel was to educate Americans about the ways Black girls learn about their worth in a world structured by antiblack racism and misogynistic thinking.[7] Though Black parents work to empower their children to have an accurate sense of their power and beauty, a Black child's ordinary experience of life – popular movies, candy wrappers – teaches otherwise. Measured against everything a community accredits and teaches to be beautiful and good, blackness – especially the blackness of a poor girl – becomes ugly. But *The Bluest Eye* teaches more than this. In addition to internalizing antiblack racism, Morrison describes how a Black community further marginalizes one of its own to recover a sense of comparative superiority. If Pecola is disgusting, and members of the community aren't Pecola, then they aren't disgusting, even if they aren't Shirley Temple. Here is how Morrison expresses the point through one of her characters,

> All of us – all who knew her [Pecola] – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent ... We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.[8]

Morrison's use of fantasy is instructive here. Though we are lulled into believing that the disgusting child – in this case, Pecola – is disgusting, disgustingness is not a natural property. Rather, it is through our actions and reactions that someone is taught how they are esteemed. And though we may want to disown or disclaim responsibility for teaching that someone is disgusting, we cannot avoid responsibility for our reactions, even when – or maybe especially when – we hide behind their "naturalness."

After a paragraph break, Morrison continues her thinking on fantasy and projection. She writes,

> And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life.[9]

I can only imagine Cavell nodding in agreement with this description. Although we take ourselves to be strong, investigation proves that we are in fact only aggressive. The person willing to undertake an education of grownups is the person willing to acknowledge the possibilities expressed in Morrison's novel, the person who will subject what they take to be natural responses to the world to the investigation. Nowhere is this more important than our ordinary aesthetic sense. When we take someone or something to be disgusting (or beautiful), might we be projecting or indulging in a fantasy of our superiority (or inferiority)? There is nothing natural – unamenable to change, written into the fabric of the world – about the Black child who internalizes antiblackness, or the community that shuns one of their own as disgusting. These are aesthetic responses that can change through education.

Cavell continuously turns our attention to this fact. We come to take our reactions and responses to the world, especially our aesthetic sense of the disgusting and the beautiful, as natural. Thus, unlearning our ordinary aesthetic and ethical responses to the world becomes an education for grownups. Growing up means, in Cavell's picture, thinking before one immediately turns away from something in disgust or rushing toward something in assent. Instead of joining one's neighbors in dismissing or actively scapegoating Pecola Breedlove as ugly, we might wonder whether our way of seeing/judging/acting is in fact worthy of assent. What led me to see Pecola as ugly, and should I see her this way? Even if I don't want to see her this way, do my reactions bely my beliefs? Though I take myself to be someone who believes that each child is special and so worthy of dignity and respect, does my aesthetic sense teach – me and others – otherwise? In the next section, I look more closely at Cavell's example of the disgusting child and argue that

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7 For an excellent discussion of the novel that also touches on ideals of cleanliness and virtue, see Als, "Toni Morrison."

8 Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, 205.

9 Ibid.

how we respond to the disgusting child says a great deal about the type of world we want to live in and the type of person we are (despite who we may take ourselves – or hope – to be).

2 The Disgusting Child

In the middle of a discussion of the importance of what Cavell calls the forgone, he offers the example of the disgusting child. Cavell introduces the foregone as another way of helping readers consider the natural.[10] According to Cavell, much of our life comes to feel as if we are on autopilot. We automatically respond and come to believe that there is no way to act but automatically. But this can't be the case; automaticity doesn't need to be our fate. The modern artist, for example, is someone who works to disrupt our automatic – we may think of them as natural – responses to the world.[11] Like the sleepwalkers in Emerson and Thoreau, many of us are simply doing what we do without giving it much thought. And though this sleepwalking may feel only harmful to ourselves – it is we who are living lives of conformity if not quiet desperation – not questioning our sense of the forgone or the natural also harms others. Here is the example of the disgusting child, offered at length.

> Some children learn that they are disgusting to those around them; and they learn to make themselves disgusting, to affect not merely their outer trappings but their skin and their membranes, in order to elicit that familiar natural reaction to themselves; as if only that now proves to them their identity or existence. But not everyone is fated to respond as a matter of course in the way the child desperately wishes, and desperately wishes not, to be responded to. Sometimes a stranger does not find the child disgusting when the child's parents do. Sometimes the stranger is a doctor and teaches the child something new in his acceptance of him. This is not accomplished by his growing *accustomed* to the disgusting creature. It is *refusing* of foregone reaction; offering the other cheek. The response frees itself from conclusions. If the freedom in saintliness were confined to saints, we would not recognize it.[12]

There is too much in this paragraph to go into. What I want to draw out are the ways that the disgusting child is trapped; both wanting the familiar reaction – affirming that they are disgusting – while also wanting its opposite: freed to be not disgusting (to oneself and others). I worked as a teacher in a reform school directly after my undergraduate education and understand this way of thinking well. The students I taught were often kicked out of multiple schools, and most bore the label of troublemaker at best.[13] Many got used to the label of troublemaker and were good at making trouble. As much as they enjoyed the fun of trouble and as much as they were used to the habit of troublemaking, it was also the case that many secretly hoped someone would turn the other cheek. Instead of following the script toward the foregone – this kid is unteachable and a hopeless case, let's cast them from our school – they wanted to be freed from this foregone conclusion. My example is ethical and professional. As a professional educator, I feel as if I have a moral obligation to turn the other cheek. Cavell's example is different in that it strikes me as explicitly aesthetic. He is asking the adult to refuse to see the disgusting child as disgusting. And though the professional obligations of teachers most certainly cover cases of disgusting children, it is sadly the case that some teachers cannot see anything but the unclean, or the ugly, or even the disgusting when they look at a student. Though they may still seek to educate the child, their reactions may undercut this aim. By not being able to see the child as anything but disgusting, they will struggle to care about the child in a human way, making meaningful education less likely if not impossible.[14]

Think back to Pecola from *The Bluest Eye*. A teacher can see Pecola as disgusting, affirming the standards of their community, affirming their – and their community's – superiority over the disgusting

10 For a discussion of this aspect of *The Claim of Reason*, see Frank, "Stanley Cavell."
11 Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 123.
12 Ibid., 123–4.
13 Shalaby, *Troublemakers*.
14 For an excellent discussion at the intersection of care ethics and Cavell's thinking, see Laugier, *Politics*.

child, but they don't have to act this way. A teacher can be the type of stranger that Cavell writes about above, refusing the foregone aesthetic response to their students. The teacher can offer the other cheek and free the child. Not because the teacher gets accustomed to the child, but because the teacher refuses the foregone conclusion. What this may look like is that the teacher begins to realize that the ordinary aesthetic standards they've internalized don't accurately track their sense of the world. This teacher can realize that they are projecting their community's internalized feelings of hurt and precarious belonging onto a child and that they cannot assent to this projection. Instead of continuing this practice, the teacher will aspire to see the child anew, freed from the ways the community feels it must see the child so that its members might feel more secure or more beautiful by contrast. In Cavell's perfectionist writings, he discusses the ways that we need to be more thoughtful about consent and conformity.[15] We need to take responsibility for the ways we let our community speak for us. When our community speaks for us in ways we don't agree with, then we must find ways of withholding our consent. In the example of the disgusting child, exemplified by Morrison's character Pecola, Cavell reminds us that we can withhold our consent by responding differently. By taking responsibility for our ordinary aesthetic response to what our community takes to be disgusting, we make ourselves a representative of a different way of being in the world.

This is where Cavell's discussion of saintliness in the disgusting child example becomes suggestive. By refusing to consent to my community's foregone conclusion that the child is disgusting, by not making *that* aesthetic judgment and response my own, I experience freedom and not just freedom as something I claim for myself. By freeing myself from my community's standards, by not conforming to those standards because I no longer take them to be my own, I liberate the disgusting child and I stand as a representative for what anyone might do. We aren't bound to automatically enact the aesthetic responses of our community. We can respond otherwise. When faced with a child, we can align our aesthetic responsiveness with our community's claim that each child is special. Wanting to live in acknowledgment that each child is special, I will refuse the aesthetic judgment that a child can be special in this way and also disgusting. As Cavell notes, "If the freedom in saintliness were confined to saints, we would not recognize it."[16] We don't need to be a saint to be a nonconformist. Rather, each of us, as ordinary human adults, can undergo an education of grownups that exposes the ways that the ideals we claim to value are not enacted in our aesthetic sense, sensibilities, and responsiveness to the world. No longer avoiding the discrepancies between what we officially teach the young (e.g., that each child is special) and what they learn from us (that some of us are disgusting), we try to become the person we tell the young we want them to be.

And it is here that I want to turn our attention to the mental health crisis, especially as it is affecting scores of young people across the globe. There are many causes and manifestations of this crisis, but I am interested in the ways that our ordinary aesthetic responses to young people can either promote or hinder possibilities of mental health, where mental health is related to young people being around adults who mean what they say. Though nothing may seem as natural as meaning what one says, the case of the disgusting child shows that adults are often confused, especially if they avoid an education of grownups. There is a yawning gap between an adult's official statements and their aesthetic responsiveness that teaches young people to devalue their worthiness. This not only harms young people, but it also undercuts the trustworthiness of adults, which further harms young people by creating the grounds for what psychologists call insecure attachment.[17] If young people cannot trust that adults mean what they say, it can lead to deep cynicism or fundamentalism as young people try to create the security they weren't given in their youth. For this reason, adults need to undergo an education that frees them to begin saying what they mean instead of mouthing an official story that is at odds with their lived experience.

15 Cavell, *Conditions*.

16 Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 124.

17 For a good summary of the importance of secure attachment in childhood and adolescence, see Siegel, *Brainstorm*.

3 Ordinary Aesthetics and the Mental Health Crisis

Just as the disgusting has aesthetic and moral aspects, in my conclusion, I focus on interest and attention, concepts with aesthetic and moral dimensions. The disgusting child is a strong example because it casts bright light on an injustice that we ourselves perpetuate through our aesthetic judgments. While the disgusting child is a strong example, the very strength of the example may make it – ironically enough – easier to distance ourselves from. The risk of finding a child disgusting may not be a very live one for very many of us. By contrast, taking an interest in someone and attending to what makes them special may be a less strong example but a more pervasive one that touches us more often and in more dimensions.

I am simplifying, but one aspect of the current mental health crisis in schools is that young people who are heavily invested in social media often report having lower levels of mental wellness.[18] There are several reasons that might explain this connection, but I take it that the constant comparison that social media makes possible can make it hard for young person to develop their own voice. Anything posted to one of several social media services is immediately met with likes or silence. And as young people observe the type of material that garners likes, they may find themselves adapting to achieve more likes without considering the consequences of this adaptation. Worse yet, if a child makes the effort to conform and still receives little attention in terms of views or likes, they may find themselves in a position similar to the disgusting child.

What I want to highlight here are the ways that social media can commodify and control our attention to the detriment of our well-being.[19] If the ordinary aesthetic sense of our children is being shaped by what might bring them attention – if not influence – on social media platforms, then this is something that we adults need to engage with, beginning with how our aesthetic sense of the world is being shaped through our engagement with the online world. As Stanley Cavell was one of the first philosophers to take seriously the ways that film can shape our sense of the world, I suggest that there is much work to be done bringing Cavell's thinking to our social media world.[20] For example, and speaking from my experience, I think it must be a frustrating and confusing experience for my children to want to engage with me and instead see me getting upset by something I am reading on my phone. They must wonder why they are less moving and interesting than something I am viewing online, even though I know – or I would like to believe this about myself – that something of passing political interest doesn't matter to me as much as my children. And yet, if I apply the framework I develop in this article to my experience, I can see that my children are learning what I don't intend to teach them. They come to see that they matter less, in terms of my attention, than the phone in my hand and matters that I know to be of fleeting political interest.

Of course, I may be overstating the case. But I think we need to investigate what our children are learning about their worth through the ways that the people around them engage with social media and the digital world. Sandra Laugier has written movingly about the attention that Henry James brings to the world, aspiring to be one on whom nothing is lost.[21] While few of us have the responsive capacities of a Henry James, one must wonder about how much of the world we lose when we are stuck heads-down in our phones. In particular, we need to think seriously about what our children are learning with their heads-down in phones while the people around them are similarly heads-down. To return briefly to Cavell's example of the disgusting child, what if the doctor who frees the child were a doctor today, would they be tapping on an iPad and delivering a diagnosis, barely touching the child, or looking up to make eye contact with them? And how common is it that a child can go through a day, especially in middle school or high school, without receiving quality attention from the people around them because we are all too busy with our devices?

As Cavell notes, one needn't be a saint to act in a saintly way, and one form saintliness may take in our time is investing our attention along the routes of what we claim, or at least hope, to value. As well, we must

18 See Murthy, *Protecting Youth*; and Twenge, *iGen*.

19 For an interesting take on the issue, written from the perspective of a college student, see Ling, "Our Well-Being."

20 See Cavell, *World Viewed*.

21 See Laugier, "Transcendentalism." For a related treatment, see Diamond, "Rough Story;" and Diamond, "Henry James."

take seriously that our ordinary aesthetic sense of the world may have atrophied to fit the form of devices we hold in our hands, and thus, an education of grownups will take the form of reclaiming that aesthetic sense so that it can help young people learn that they are valued by us and that they have value. While social media makes it easy to flatten everyone into a common system where they can be rated up and down, swiped one way or the other, liked or ignored, the individual standing in front of us is still a person who we can choose to engage with and take an interest in. Though it can be more difficult to engage outside of these leveling and flattening digital platforms, this non-digital engagement is what young people crave. Absent this analog attention, they may feel like Emerson's ghosts, floating through the world, wondering if anyone is real, including themselves. By educating our aesthetic capacities, we can remind young people that they – and we – are as real as we make ourselves through the attention we devote to cultivating those aesthetic capacities. It can become a virtuous circle. Attending to the other, aspects of their self are disclosed or made more apparent, and this reminds us how much we can learn about another person – and our capacities – by paying better attention, making us want to engage more attentively in the future. By contrast, heads-down in our phones, we feel that nothing can pierce our solipsism and so there is no use in making any effort. We doom ourselves to disconnection, instead of taking on the work of being someone on whom nothing – and no one – is lost. I suggest that we must care enough to attend to the other, cultivating our ordinary aesthetic sense of what it means to matter, and we must stay alive to how it feels when we are cast out as disgusting and unworthy of positive attention. There is nothing natural about young people feeling disgusting, disconnected, and unworthy of attention. Rather, it is up to us to turn away from deadening forms of attention and toward possibilities of care for others and our world through the quality of attention we bring to each other. Though it can be difficult to realize that through conformity we don't say what we mean, turning away from deadening conformity can make us a representative of the type of world young people hunger and thirst for, reminding them that undergoing an education of grownups remains a live and enlivening option for us all.

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