

Editorial

The psychology of aversion ... In the times of covid-19

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Without a doubt, we are experiencing a difficult moment. These days, our concerns seem to orbit in one way or another around the threat of being infected and the “costs” derived from regulating it. Although the speed of the “spread” of related information gives this phenomenon a contemporary texture (Dawkins’ memetic analogy, never again in force), the particular economics of preventing infectious contacts is far from being current a concern. Indeed, the presence of parasites and the danger of contracting infectious diseases have been a constant threat to the survival and reproduction of the species from our ancestral past. As a consequence, the need to effectively regulate these threats—often invisible—has “shaped” much of our psychology and our social behavior. Given that one of the most powerful transmitters of pathogens is ourselves it is relevant to look back at the psychology of aversion in the days of COVID-19.

Psychologist Steven Pinker (1997) defines aversion as an “intuitive microbiology”. Specifically, it seems that our immune system has a first line of defense that is responsible for avoiding the high energy costs (at the metabolic level) that comes from fighting infectious agents. This “Behavioral Immune System” (BIS, Schaller and Duncan, 2007) would be made up of a series of affective, cognitive and behavioral mechanisms, whose common denominator is “hypersensitivity” towards any possible indicator of the source of infection. In this way, this system works analogously to a smoke detector, prioritizing “false positive” type errors over “false negative” type errors. This is due to the “adaptive cost” of each type of error: while the cost of

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avoiding an ambiguously contagious (but harmless) stimulus is acceptable (“to be wrong with the home delivery man”), the cost of approaching a possible entity pathogen carrier is much higher (“infection”). Our aversion psychology is first and foremost cautious, and social interactions are no exception.

Indeed, the fact that situations of social ambiguity are easily perceived as disturbing and dangerous implies a series of consequences for our way of navigating the social world. The BIS is an expert in identifying perceptible indicators of disease, but its diagnosis is not always correct, far from it. The existence of negative biases towards people with facial disfigurement and, in general, towards people with strange and / or unattractive faces, could be a side effect of the “hypersensitivity” of this system: those deviations from the canons of physical typicality they are implicitly inferred as signs of possible disease, and therefore, the conservative BIS diagnosis “suggests” establishing social distance. Hence, the psychology of aversion doesn’t think twice about quarantining.

In this context, the extension of the psychology of aversion to the moral realm cannot be understood without reference to the emotion of disgust. This emotional response, originally evolved to avoid the intake of toxic substances (e.g., decomposing food) and contact with potential disease-transmitting substances (e.g., vomiting, body fluids, blood, excrement, etc.), appears to have been “co -adapted” to also avoid interaction with” toxic “people. Thus, in recent decades, various studies have documented the existence of a close relationship between disgust and moral cognition, a relationship that has not been without controversy given its normative implications. One aspect to consider is the associative, uncompromising, and irrational nature of this emotional response. Along these lines, the psychologist Paul Rozin (2008) observes that, in different cultural systems, disgust obeys two “magical” or “ideational” laws: the law of contagion (“once you come in contact, you are always in contact) and the law of similarity (“the same thing produces the same thing”). The object of disgust therefore has the ability to contaminate anyone it touches, and this state of contamination is not easily removable, in the same way that a drop of black paint permanently alters the purity of a white paint solution. Like all predominantly associative responses, disgust is largely inflexible to reason, and the perception of a single action that reveals a person’s “toxicity” may be enough to condemn him to moral ostracism. Certainly, various studies have associated disgust with signs of bad moral character. In particular, some authors suggest that “moral disgust” is a reaction to a subclass of abominable moral offenses, those that reveal that an individual lacks normal human motives (those people and behaviors that are morally “sick”). At least among Westerners, moral disgust seems to safeguard the lower limit of the category of humanity: those actions that “degrade” and dehumanize their perpetrators would provoke moral disgust in others (e.g., animal abuse or pedophilia).

Moments like this, in which we are especially sensitive towards issues of contamination and anxiety seem to implicitly accompany the sighting of human presence, it is worth reflecting on the normative implications of aversion, and be cautious when validating their visceral diagnoses (“guilty until proven otherwise”). In a situation like the one we live in Colombia, in which the most immediate and / or certain danger for a large part of the population is the lack of resources to survive the crisis, the economy of aversion is subjected to a constant “trade off” in which the level of baseline aversion is regulated by the perceived benefit of risky behavior (selling on the street vs. getting food). Given that our “intuitive microbiology” can be more inflexible and supervisory than many emergency policies, this excessive pragmatism can have a potential cost in the social sphere, especially when we consider that disgust behaves in an associative way (“impurity” / “contamination” / “censorship”) and underlies, as an emotional support, the perception of dehumanization and the moral censorship of the “different” (“the street vendor does not quarantine” / “he is contaminated” / “he does not care for others”). On a personal note, I consider that discussing the normative aspects of a feature of human nature (“how should we work”) without having a deep understanding of the descriptive aspect (“how do we work”) is a spurious exercise: hence the importance of better understand the nature of aversion in order to establish better social policies in a context such as the one we live in.

Conflict of interests

The author declares the non-existence of conflicts of interest with any type of institution or commercial association.

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