
PROFANITY: THE GNOSTIC AFFRONT OF THE SEVEN WORDS YOU CAN NEVER SAY ON TELEVISION

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Profanity remains a mystery to psychological science as we have little understanding as to why obscene speech tends to cluster around body-related subject matter. However, recent work in the areas of Terror Management Theory and disgust psychology suggest that the offense of profanity may be due to the fact that profanity highlights the animal nature of the human body, which, in turn, implicates profanity as a death/mortality reminder. If so, profanity might be experienced differently in Christian populations depending upon the degree to which the body is viewed suspiciously, a lingering influence of Gnostic thought within the Christian tradition. This paper presents empirical research that attempted to assess these associations. Overall, the data was found to be consistent with the notion that profanity may function, particularly in some Christian communities, as a Gnostic affront, as an insult to a creature aspiring to be more than an animal.

The whole problem with this idea of obscenity and indecency, and all of these things—bad language and whatever—it's all caused by one basic thing, and that is: religious superstition ... that the human body is somehow evil and bad and there are parts of it that are especially evil and bad, and we should be ashamed. Fear, guilt and shame are built into the attitude toward sex and the body. (George Carlin, 2004, Interview with Associated Press)

Whether it is called profanity, swearing, or vulgarity, obscene or taboo language is a ubiquitous feature in human life. One can hardly get through a workday, TV show, or movie without hearing swearing of one kind or another. And yet, profanity remains a mystery to psychological science. We have little understanding as

to why obscene speech tends to cluster around body-related subject matter (Pinker, 2007). However, recent work in the area of Terror Management Theory suggests that the offense of profanity might be due to the fact that profanity highlights the animal nature of the human body, which, in turn, implicates profanity as a death/mortality reminder. If so, profanity might be experienced differently in religious populations depending upon the degree to which the body is viewed suspiciously, a lingering influence of Gnostic thought within the Christian tradition.

Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television: The Mystery of Profanity

There is little scientific consensus as to why profanities tend to cluster around specific themes. Consider, for example, the paradigmatic inventory of profanity: George Carlin's famous list of "The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." Commenting on Carlin's list, the psychologist Steven Pinker (2007, p. 326-327) has noted the following:

The seven words you can never say on television refer to sexuality and excretion: they are names for feces, urine, intercourse, the vagina, breasts, a person who engages in fellatio, and a person who acts out an Oedipal desire.

But it's not only sexuality and excretion that are implicated in profanity. Pinker goes on:

But the capital crime in the Ten Commandments comes from a different subject, theology, and the taboo words in many languages refer to perdition, deities, messiahs, and their associated relics and body parts. Another semantic field that spawns taboo words across the world's languages is death and disease, and still another is disfavored classes of people such as infidels, enemies, and subordinate ethnic groups. But what could these concepts—from mammaries to messiahs to maladies to minorities—possibly have in common?

Pinker suggests that these semantic clusters can be united by noting that profanity generally creates a strong negative emotion. More specifically, many profanities appear to be associated with the psychology

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of disgust and contamination. Urine, feces, blood, and other bodily effluvia are both routinely referenced in obscene speech as well being reliable disgust elicitors (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994). But the profanity/disgust link is incomplete as it fails to capture facets of religious cursing (e.g., damn, hell), references to sexual intercourse (e.g., the f-word), or references to body parts (e.g., breasts, genitalia). What can link these sources of profanity?

Profanity and Disgust: A Terror Management View

Terror Management Theory (TMT) is fast becoming one of the most influential theoretical and empirical paradigms in social psychology (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Rooted in existential psychology, primarily the work of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT attempts to understand the psychological mechanics involved in how persons cope with existential "terrors," most notably the fear of death.

One facet of TMT research has been to examine how various facets of everyday existence can become existentially problematic, particularly when functioning as death reminders. We are unsettled upon being reminded of our death and, thus, tend to repress or avoid aspects of life that make death salient. Much of this research has focused on how the body functions as a mortality reminder. The vulnerability of our bodies highlights the existential predicament that we will one day die and decay. Further, the gritty physicality of the body (e.g., blood, sweat, odors, waste) highlights our animal nature which functions as an existential affront to our aspirations of being transcendent spiritual creatures.

Based upon these insights, an impressive body of empirical work has strongly linked body ambivalence to death concerns. For example, mortality/death concerns have been linked to sexual ambivalence (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999; Goldenberg, Cox, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2002; Landau, et al., 2006), avoidance of physical sensation (Goldenberg, Hart, Pyszczynski, Warnica, Landau, & Thomas, 2004), concerns over physical appearance (Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000), and resistance to human/animal comparisons (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Kluck, & Cornwall, 2001). Much of this research is summarized by Goldenberg, Pyszczynski,

Greenberg, & Solomon (2000, p.24) who conclude: "[T]he body is a problem because it makes evident our similarity to other animals; this similarity is a threat because it reminds us that we are eventually going to die."

The TMT research mentioned above is consistent with a theory posited by Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (2000) regarding the association between disgust and death. Specifically, beyond the aversions associated with oral incorporation (called "core disgust"), the following stimuli are known as reliable disgust elicitors (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994): Body products (e.g., feces, vomit), animals (e.g., insects, rats), sexual behaviors (e.g., incest, homosexuality), contact with the dead or corpses, violations of the exterior envelope of the body (e.g., gore, deformity), poor hygiene, interpersonal contamination (e.g., contact with unsavory persons), and moral offenses. After separating out disgust associated with social contact or moral offenses (called "sociomoral disgust"), Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (2000) have grouped the remaining disgust domains under the category "animal-reminder disgust." See Table 1 for the disgust domains broken down by category. Rozin et al. argue that the coherent theme of the "animal-reminder" domain is that each stimulus highlights the physical nature and vulnerability of the human body and, thus, acts as a death/mortality reminder. This analysis has obtained empirical support (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Kluck, & Cornwall, 2001).

The F-Word: Sex, Death, and the Body

Although it may seem obvious that corpses, gore, or physical deformity function as death reminders, it might be less clear as to why sexual intercourse, one of the most pleasurable of human experiences, is the referent for one of the strongest profanities—the f-word—in the English language. One theory, obvious when considered in conjunction with the anger with which the f-word is often used, is that references to sex function as forms of verbal sexual *assault* (e.g., see Neu's, 2007, analysis of the f-word). But this theory is limited in explaining the use of the f-word in contexts where aggression isn't implicated. For example, sexual partners might say "*Let's f****" in contrast to "*Let's make love*". Although the referent is the same in each sentence the connotation is very different, and not necessarily negatively so.

Is it possible that the f-word functions as a death reminder? A recent study by Goldenberg, Pyszczynski,

TABLE 1

Disgust eliciting domains with associated stimuli (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000)

Core Disgust Stimuli	Disgust Domains	
	Sociomoral Disgust Stimuli	Animal-Reminder Disgust Stimuli
Food Products	Moral Offenses	Body Products
Body Products	Interpersonal Contact	Poor Hygiene
Animals		Sexual Behaviors
		Animals
		Contact with corpses or the dead
		Violations of body envelope

McCoy, Greenburg, and Solomon (1999) is very suggestive here. Specifically, in the Goldenburg et al. study participants high in neuroticism were separated into one of two imagery groups. One group was asked to imagine the spiritual/romantic aspects of sexual intercourse (e.g., being loved by the partner, connecting spiritually with the partner). In contrast, the second group was asked to imagine the physical/bodily aspects of the sexual encounter (e.g., tasting bodily fluids, skin rubbing). After the imagery exercise the two groups were asked to engage in a word-fragment completion task where the word-fragments (e.g., sk_ll, coff _ _) could be completed in either a death (e.g., skull, coffin) or non-death (e.g., skill, coffee) related manner. The results indicated that thinking about the physical/bodily aspects of sex created greater death thought accessibility (i.e., those in the physical imagery condition were significantly more likely to complete the words as *skull* or *coffin* than as *skill* or *coffee*).

Given this death/sex link, Goldenburg et al. (1999) suggest that sex is psychologically complicated for humans. On the one hand, as we have been discussing, sex can be a disgusting reminder of our bodily functions and dependencies. And yet, sex is also experienced as a spiritually transcendent act, where “two fleshs become one.” In short, the physical aspects of sex are latent mortality reminders while the relational and emotional aspects of sex transport the act into the spiritual and sacred realm of human experience.

It appears, then, that the f-word exploits the fissure that exists between the physical and the spiritual aspects of sex. Properly understood, sex is a *dual* act, a union of both the physical and the spiritual. Stripped of its spiritual significance and meaning,

sex is reduced to its animal function. This is the f-word’s power. It strips sex of its spiritual significance, reducing the act to physical manipulations. In short, the f-word functions, literally, as a profanity. Something that is considered to be sacred is stripped of its spiritual content and rendered both *profane* and *vulgar* (Goldenberg, Cox, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2002).

(However, as noted above, this “profaning of sex” can be playful, exploited by sexual partners who use the f-word. Saying “*Let’s f****” in contrast to “*Let’s make love*” is a request for a sexual encounter that is more *physical* than sentimental. That is, consistent with the theory above, the f-word is picking out *the body*, as opposed to the spirit, as the locus of pleasure. But it should also be noted that, for the healthy couple, this request is playful in that it picks out the body against the backdrop and context of the deeper and more fundamental spiritual relationship.)

Profanity and Gnosticism

Gnostic influences within Christianity. How does profanity relate to the psychology of religious belief? If profanity functions as a body/death reminder then attitudes about profanity may vary within and between Christian populations. Specifically, attitudes about profanity would depend upon how the body is psychologically and theologically experienced within a particular faith community.

Why would this be the case? As an answer we can note that, from the earliest days of the church, beginning with the Gnostic heresies, many Christian communities have struggled with the body as a locus of theological reflection (for an excellent review of the

impact of Gnosticism upon how the body is viewed within Christianity see Hall & Thoennes, 2006). As Philip Lee (1987, p. 49) has noted in his historical survey of Gnostic influences upon Christianity, "From Simeon Stylites to St. Francis of Assisi to certain aspects of Calvinism, the aversion to this world with a desire to escape it has been one of the most prominent strands in the fabric of Christianity." Furthermore, this aversion has "led to some unfortunate attitudes toward the flesh, human nature, and sexuality" (Lee, 1987, p. 53) within contemporary Christianity. This suspicion of the body has deep roots in American evangelicalism. Take, for example, this assessment of Jonathan Edwards, a leader of early American Protestantism (as cited in Lee, 1987, pp. 131-132): "The insides of the body of man is full of filthiness, contains his bowels that are full of dung, which represents the corruption and filthiness that the heart of man is naturally full of." A similar sentiment comes from the Puritan leader Cotton Mather. Mather's lament about the depravity of the body is triggered by his encounter with a dog while urinating (cited in Lee, 1987, p. 131):

I was once emptying the Cistern of Nature, and making Water at the Wall. At the same Time, there came a Dog, who did so too, before me. Thought I; "What mean and vile Things are the Children of Men, in this mortal State! How much do our natural Necessities abase us and place us in some regard, on the Level with the very Dogs!" ... Accordingly, I resolved, that it should be my ordinary Practice, whenever I step to answer the one or other Necessity of Nature, to make it an Opportunity of shaping in my Mind some noble, divine Thought.

Mather's reflection is a near perfect illustration of the animal-reminder facet of disgust. Mather finds urination, one of many "natural Necessities," to be dog-like and, as such, an affront to human dignity. Finally, beyond feces and urination, throughout Christian history the church has expressed ambivalence concerning human sexuality. This is most clearly seen in the Catholic tradition where participation in sex, even within a marital bond, disqualifies a person from the priesthood. Celibacy, complete non-participation in sex, has often throughout church history been expressed as a spiritual ideal. And these are not simply isolated historical examples. Hall and Thoennes (2006, p. 34) conclude their theological and anthropological survey of Gnostic influences upon contemporary Christian culture by noting the following:

Gnosticism is also evident in our contemporary evangelical culture and theology. For example, we talk about dying and going to heaven rather than looking forward to the true culmination of Christ's work in the resurrection of the body. We

categorize sins, so that sins of the body, such as sexual immorality, are seen as more serious than non-physical sins such as gossip. Although our formal theology is orthodox in recognizing that Jesus was both God and man, in efforts to defend his full deity, we may deemphasize his humanity and particularly his physical humanity.

Profanity as a Gnostic affront. Interestingly, many of the Gnostic sentiments noted above—offense at defecation, urination, and sex—parallel the earlier analyses regarding profanity as a death/mortality reminder. Specifically, might death anxiety be implicated in Christian suspicions of the body? A recent study by Beck (2008) supports this notion. Specifically, Beck (2008) observed that death anxiety was associated with rejecting various Incarnational scenarios regarding the life of Jesus. Participants the most anxious about death tended to reject the idea that Jesus experienced various bodily ailments or vulnerabilities. That is, the Christian participants most anxious about death preferred a vision of Jesus who was relatively immune to bodily decay and dysfunction, a *superhuman* Jesus.

Following Beck (2008) and the research reviewed above, it seems reasonable to posit that profanity may function as a kind of *Gnostic affront* to certain Christian believers. Specifically, if a rejection/suspicion of the body (a Gnostic stance) is rooted in death anxiety, then profanity, as an animal/body reminder, would be particularly offensive to these believers. By contrast, Christians less suspicious and more welcoming of the body (contra Gnosticism) would be predicted to be less reactive to profanity, less offended or bothered by it.

Of course, a variety of objections can be raised at this point. First, body ambivalence is not unique to the Gnostic tradition. The book of Leviticus is full of prohibitions related to sex, the body and bodily products. In short, body ambivalence is widely observed in many religions, many of which predate the Gnostics. However, in the Christian tradition the Gnostic doctrines were prime examples of body ambivalence. Thus, the use of the adjective "Gnostic" in this paper is simply a reference to a particular and influential historical exemplar of body ambivalence within the Christian tradition (i.e., "Gnostic" as in "similar to the Gnostics").

Second, the study is not arguing that offense at profanity can be reduced to Gnostic tendencies within Christianity. For example, many Christians might object to profanity because it simply functions as form of degradation. Haidt and Graham's (2007)

work on the moral foundation of sacredness seems relevant here. That is, a profanity may function as an assault upon the sacred character of human persons. However, an appeal to Haidt's theory raises more questions than it answers. Specifically, why would a reference to the body or sex be degrading? The Gnostic affront formulation might help explain this body/degradation link.

Finally, we need to be careful in assuming that body ambivalence characterizes the entire Christian community. Many Christian traditions and communities have high views of the body and human embodiment. And yet, as Hall and Thoennes (2006) and Lee (1987) have argued, many Protestant traditions have struggled with the body. The important point going forward is that when body ambivalence or Gnostic influences are being discussed we must be careful not to paint with too broad a brush. We Christians are a heterogeneous lot.

The Present Study

The present study was a preliminary attempt to assess some of the hypothesized associations between death anxiety, disgust, religious belief, and profanity offense. Focusing on three common profanity words related to feces, urine, and sexual intercourse, Christian participants were asked to rate how offended they become when they hear these words used in casual conversation. Participants also completed a measure of death anxiety. To assess disgust sensitivity, the animal-reminder disgust items of the *Disgust Scale* (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994) was also administered. Finally, in addition to a measure of Christian orthodoxy, the *Defensive Theology Scale* (DTS; Beck, 2006) was used to assess the degree of existential "defensiveness" in each participant's faith stance. High scores on the DTS indicate that a person is strongly endorsing existentially comforting religious beliefs, presumably to manage existential fears such as death anxiety (Beck, 2006). Consequently, it was predicted that high DTS scores would be positively correlated with profanity offense and animal-reminder disgust. That is, participants who appear to be theologically protecting themselves from existential fears (such as death anxiety) were predicted to be the most resistant to the body/animal/death reminders latent in both profanity and body-related disgust stimuli. Overall, the associations noted above would be consistent with a "Gnostic affront" hypothesis concerning profanity:

Offense at profanity would be (partly) due to profanity functioning as a body/mortality reminder.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 266 undergraduate volunteers enrolled in undergraduate classes at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, TX. The mean age of the participants was 18.96 ($SD = 1.34$). Fifty-nine percent of the sample of was female. The ethnicity breakdown was as follows: 76.7% Caucasian, 7.1% African-American, 9.0% Hispanic/Latino, 1.9% Asian American, 5.3% Other. The religious affiliation breakdown was as follows: 46.6% Church of Christ, 23.3% Nondenominational, 15.4% Baptist, 4.5% Catholic, 10.2% Other. After providing informed consent and demographic information participants completed measures of disgust sensitivity, death anxiety, religious belief, and profanity offense.

Assessment Instruments

Disgust Scale-Animal Reminder Subscale. The *Disgust Scale* (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994) contains 32 self-report items, eight of which assess animal-reminder disgust. Examples of the animal-reminder items include: "It would bother me tremendously to touch a dead body," "It would not upset me at all to watch a person with a glass eye take the eye out of the socket," and "You see a man with his intestines exposed after an accident." Each of the eight items are rated on a 1 (*Not disgusting at all*) to 5 (*Extremely disgusting*) likert scale. In this sample the animal-reminder items generated a Cronbach's alpha of .81.

Death Anxiety. Death anxiety was assessed with the Templer Death Anxiety Scale (TDAS; Lonetto & Templer, 1983). The TDAS is a 15-item self-report scale that uses a True/False response format. Example items from the TDAS include "I am very much afraid to die" and "I often think about how short life really is." In this sample, the TDAS generated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .70.

Defensive Theology Scale. The *Defensive Theology Scale* (DTS; Beck, 2006) is a 22-item self-report measure developed to capture facets of existential defensiveness in Christian belief as described by Beck (2004). Each item is rated on a 1-7 likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly Agree*). DTS items assess five related themes: Special protection (e.g., "I believe God protects me from illness and

TABLE 2

Zero-order correlations between profanity offense and measures of animal-reminder disgust, death anxiety, and religious belief

Variables:	1	2	3	4
1. Profanity Offense				
2. Death Anxiety	.11*			
3. Animal-Reminder Disgust	.23***	.50***		
4. Defensive Theology Scale	.18**	.04	.22***	
5. Orthodoxy	.01	.07	.01	.48***

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

misfortune,” “I believe that fewer bad things will happen to me in this life because God is protecting me from harm”), Special Insight (e.g., “God gives me clear and obvious signs to communicate His will to me,” “When making a choice or tough decision, God gives me clear answers and direction”), Divine Solicitousness (“Nothing is too small, like finding my lost keys, to pray to God about,” “If you have deep faith and pure motives God will grant even your smallest requests”), Special Destiny (“God has a very specific plan for my life that I must search for and find,” “God has a destiny for me to find and fulfill”), and Denial of Randomness (“Every event around us is a sign of God’s larger plans and purposes,” “God controls every event around us, down to the smallest details”). Consequently, high scores on the DTS reflect a faith configuration that is existentially more comforting relative to lower scores. In this sample, the DTS generated a Cronbach’s alpha estimate of .91.

Orthodoxy. As a measure of Christian orthodoxy the Christian Orthodoxy Scale (COS; Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982) was used. The COS is a 24-item scale that assesses the degree to which someone accepts beliefs central to Christianity (e.g., Jesus was the Son of God, Jesus was resurrected, Jesus performed miracles). The COS uses a self-report format where respondents rate their degree of belief or disbelief along a 6-point continuum (-3 = *strongly disagree* to +3 = *strongly agree*). In this sample the COS generated a Cronbach’s alpha of .95.

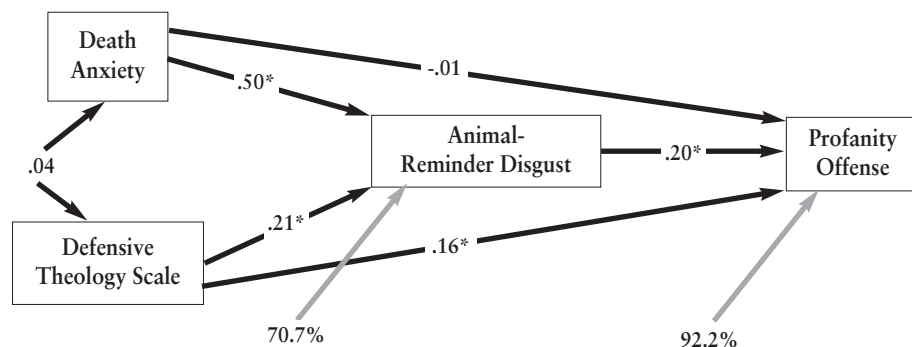
Profanity offense. Offense at profanity was assessed by selecting three common profanities related to urine, feces, and sex: *piss*, *shit*, and *fuck*. (Given the religious sensibilities of the sample, participants were warned that they were going to be

asked to read three fully spelled out profanities such as “the f-word.” If the participant anticipated being morally offended by reading the words they were encouraged to terminate participation before proceeding.) Participants were asked to read each word and then given the following question: *Rate your degree of offense at hearing this word used in casual conversation.* A seven-point likert scale was provided for each word (1 = *Not at all offended*, 7 = *Extremely offended*). The ratings across the three items were summed and averaged. The mean item rating was 3.19 ($SD = 1.69$). The Cronbach alpha calculated for the three items was .86. The mean inter-correlation of the three items was .67.

RESULTS

The zero-order correlations between profanity offense and the measures of animal-reminder disgust sensitivity, death anxiety, and religious belief are presented in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 2, death anxiety had a small but significant positive correlation with profanity offense. That is, those reporting greater death anxiety reported being the most offended by profanity. A convergent correlation was observed between animal-reminder disgust sensitivity and profanity offense. Specifically, those reporting greater disgust at animal-reminder scenarios were also the most offended by profanity. A final convergent correlation was observed with the *Defensive Theology Scale*. Participants holding a suite of theological beliefs that are deemed to be existentially comforting were the most offended by profanity. In comparison, orthodoxy ratings were uncorrelated with profanity offense. Overall, this pattern of trends

Figure 1. Path coefficients and disturbance variance estimates for death anxiety, animal-reminder disgust, and DTS ratings predicting profanity offense. *Note:* * $p < .05$.



is consistent with the notion that profanity functions as a Gnostic affront, as a death/body/mortality reminder. Christian participants the most fearful of death, the most disgusted at animal-reminder stimuli and who held the most existentially comforting religious beliefs were the participants reporting the greatest offense at profanity.

Given the hypothesized associations between religious belief, death anxiety and disgust, the correlational analyses of Table 2 was followed up with a path analytic model to explore possible mediated effects as well as to assess the relative independence of the predictors in explaining the variance of profanity offense. Although a variety of models could have been specified, a simple model allowing for tests of indirect effects for DTS and death anxiety scores via animal-reminder disgust ratings was used. The logic was that both disgust and offense at profanity are emotional responses, suggesting that animal-reminder disgust might act as a proximate cause upon profanity offense (with death anxiety and theological belief functioning as more diffuse, distal causes). This model can be found in Figure 1.

The path coefficients in Figure 1 were calculated by conducting two separate regression analyses (Kline, 1998). In the first analysis, death anxiety and DTS scores were used to predict animal-reminder disgust ratings. In the second analysis, death anxiety, DTS, and animal-reminder ratings were used to predict profanity offense. The standardized path coefficients (standardized betas) and the disturbance variance estimates ($1 - R$ Squared) were taken from each respective regression analysis. Overall, both death

anxiety and DTS scores had significant direct effects upon of animal-reminder disgust explaining 29.3% of its variance. When all three predictors were used to predict profanity offense only DTS and animal-reminder disgust ratings displayed significant direct effects explaining 7.8% of the profanity offense variance. An observation of Figure 1 suggests that the impact of death anxiety upon profanity offense might be best understood as an indirect effect mediated by animal-reminder disgust. To test this conclusion Table 3 presents the decomposition of the direct and indirect effects of death anxiety, DTS, and animal-reminder disgust ratings upon profanity offense. As expected, an examination of Table 3 suggests that the effect of death anxiety upon profanity offense is largely due to its association with animal-reminder disgust. This observation seems to suggest that death anxiety and animal-reminder disgust, two closely related constructs, function respectively as distal and proximal effects upon profanity offense. By contrast, DTS scores, although associated with animal-reminder disgust, continued to have a direct unmediated effect upon profanity offense.

DISCUSSION

From a definitional standpoint, profanity and vulgarity share a semantic core. Specifically, something is profaned when its sacred or holy character is defiled and debased rendering it “common” or “profane.” In a similar way, vulgarity refers to “crude language.” But we should be quick to note that the origin of the word *vulgar* comes from the attempts of social elites to distinguish their speech and habits

TABLE 3

Decomposition of direct and indirect effects of death anxiety, DTS, and animal-reminder disgust ratings upon profanity offense scores

Causal variable	Endogenous variable	
	Animal-Reminder Disgust	Profanity Offense
<u>Death Anxiety</u>		
Direct effect	.50***	-.01
Indirect effect via Disgust		.10*
Total effect	.50***	.09
<u>Defensive Theology Scale</u>		
Direct effect	.21***	.16**
Indirect effect via Disgust		.04
Total effect	.21***	.20**
<u>Animal-Reminder Disgust</u>		
Direct effect		.20**

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

from the lower, poorer classes. As with profanity, vulgarity is speech that demeans or degrades something that is lofty and civilized. Profanity and vulgarity are “gutter,” “bathroom,” or “barnyard” speech. It is “low” speech. And given the common metaphorical maps of High = Good and Low = Bad (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), vulgar and profane speech is understood to be immoral, sinful, improper, filthy, and dirty.

The guiding theory of this research was that the physical body becomes implicated in the high/low good/bad mapping of profanity and vulgarity. As observed in the “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” profanity appears to semantically cluster around the body (e.g., body parts, sexual behaviors, body effluvia). If so, why are these body references considered to be “unclean,” “dirty” or “sinful”? This association (the body = offensive and sinful) has puzzled students of taboo language. One possible answer to this puzzle comes from the literatures of Terror Management Theory and disgust psychology. Summarizing, there is good empirical evidence that body references are disgusting and offensive because they function as death/mortality reminders. Consequently, as a verbal reminder of death, profanity functions as a psychological assault.

But where does religious belief and theology fit into this analysis? As we have observed, profanity and vulgarity presume a background assumption that something holy, spiritual, or elevated is being

debased, brought “low,” and contaminated. A simple death reminder does not entail this contamination of the spiritual by the physical. What is necessary for such a notion is a theological background where human existence is divided into the spiritual and the physical. Further, there must be an assumption, most salient in the Gnostic and neo-Platonic influences within Christianity (Ehrman, 2003), that the spiritual realm is holy and pure and that the body is dirty and a locus of contamination. With these backdrop assumptions in place it becomes clear how profanity acts as a Gnostic affront. By making salient the oozy and disgusting aspects of our bodies, profanity highlights our animal nature mocking any Gnostic pretensions that humans might escape, avoid, or minimize their physical existence. Profanity is a shock to a creature aspiring to be like the angels.

Interestingly, George Carlin of “Seven Words” fame (himself no mean theologian) articulated a very similar analysis in the quote found at the beginning of this article. Although we should take Carlin’s swipe at “religious superstition” with a grain of salt, Carlin did put his finger upon the association at the root of this paper: Offense at profanity as the product of a religious strain that finds the body disgusting and offensive. Within Christianity this strain began with the early Gnostic believers (Ehrman, 2003), but it continues in sectors of Christianity (Lee, 1987) often producing dysfunction (Hall & Thoennes,

2006). Of course, not all Christian believers are characterized by Gnostic tendencies or assumptions. But insofar as Christian believers have adopted Gnostic-type attitudes toward the body we can expect that their offense at profanity is more acute relative to other believers. Carlin might have missed his mark, but his analysis is both prescient and cogent.

Although the results of the present study are by no means an exhaustive test of the predicted associations, the data was consistent with the predictions suggesting that further research could prove fruitful. Specifically, consistent with a Terror Management view of profanity, both death anxiety and animal-reminder disgust was associated with being offended by profanity. This alone is an interesting, and non-obvious, relationship. Further, it was also observed that Christian believers holding the most existentially comforting belief systems were the most offended by profanity. As with the prior associations, this relationship is non-obvious until it is viewed against the theoretical backdrop of this paper. In short, the present research is consistent with the notion that profanity functions 1) as a death/mortality reminder and 2) as a Gnostic affront.

Limitations, Cautions, and Conclusions

Of course, caution is warranted in generalizing beyond the current study. The research was limited by a number of sampling and design issues. First, the convenience sample used was very homogeneous, demographically and religiously. Consequently, there are significant questions about the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the results. As noted earlier, not all Christian groups are typified or characterized by body ambivalence.

Second, the correlational and cross-sectional nature of the design is also problematic. Also, the observed trends, although significant and convergent, were small to modest as effect sizes. Consequently, the theoretical associations guiding the current research project should be subjected to further research. The current paper is best evaluated as a theoretical innovation coupled with some preliminary pilot data. However, preliminary correlational evidence of this sort can be helpful in the early stages of theory development as it can establish a *prima facie* case to stimulate more costly research efforts. An excellent next step would be to examine these associations in an experimental situation. For example, procedures similar to Goldenberg et al. (1999)

could be used to determine if a profanity prime (e.g., reading a story or watching a movie scene with a great deal of profanity in it) heightens death thought accessibility. Also, Implicit Association Test (IAT) procedures could be used to approach the Gnostic affront hypothesis. For example, the strength of one's Gnostic associations (body = bad; spirit = good) could be assessed in an IAT with that association then being used to predict offense at profanity (or any other variable of interest). Finally, given that profanity and vulgarity are implicated in appraisals of dignity, degradation and propriety future research might also examine language usage in light of recent work on the moral psychology of divinity and purity (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999).

In conclusion, this study suggests that death/mortality concerns may be implicated in offense at profanity. Further, Gnostic attitudes toward the body might exacerbate this reaction in some Christian populations. From a historical stance these findings are intriguing given the persistent influence Gnostic views have exerted upon Christian thought. And from a psychological stance these findings suggest that psychological dynamics might be implicated in religious life in ways that are both subtle and surprising.

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