

## A DEFENSE OF CANNIBALISM

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### I. INTRODUCTION

There have been few philosophers who have defended cannibalism. Most partial defenses of this behavior have amounted to endorsing relativism: there is some tribal practice of which the consumption of human flesh is an integral part. One must thus respect this practice despite its seeming dissimilarity to one's own. It would be an ethnocentric mistake to say that the practice is wrong.

This sort of argument is not a defense of cannibalism so much as it is a defense of the rights of a people to engage in practices crucial to their culture. As such, it is not an argument that is relevant to the current inquiry. The object of the current inquiry is the morality of cannibalism *regardless* of one's culture. The vast majority of people in the developed West claim that cannibalism is wrong. This claim is not obviously true, even if it has some *prima facie* plausibility. Indeed, most people further claim that under extreme situations, cannibalism is permissible (e.g., when it is necessary to survival). This article is concerned with the distinction (or lack thereof) between the extreme and normal situations.

Cannibalism can be defined as the intentional consumption of the flesh of a member of one's own species. When discussing the moral permissibility of cannibalism, it is important to isolate the phenomenon in question. It is obvious that *murdering* someone for the sole purpose of ingesting the flesh of that person is morally reprehensible. This does not show that cannibalism is wrong, it merely re-affirms that murdering is. Likewise, eating the flesh of a person while that person is still alive is obviously wrong, at least insofar as it inflicts unwanted and unnecessary pain on that person. In considering the morality of cannibalism, it is assumed that the acts of cannibalism in question occur *after* the cannibalized has died, and further, that the cannibalized has not been murdered. What, then, is wrong with cannibalism?

In what follows, three utilitarian arguments, three Kantian arguments, and one quasi-Kantian argument against cannibalism are considered. Each of these arguments, it will be shown, fails to demonstrate that cannibalism is morally wrong. Moreover, it seems that some Kantian considerations can explain why

cannibalism *is* justified in some circumstances. The article concludes that the moral prohibition against cannibalism is not rationally justified, even if there are other (sentimental) grounds for refraining from eating human flesh.

## II. THREE UTILITARIAN ARGUMENTS

The first argument one might produce in the attempt to establish the immorality of cannibalism concerns the harm done to the cannibalized. Because, in the case under consideration, the cannibalized is neither eaten alive nor murdered in order to be eaten, it is unclear what the 'harm' in question might come to. If one is dead, it is by no means clear that one can be harmed. Even if we grant that death itself is a harm (because it happens to the living), it does not follow that things that occur to bodies after death can constitute a harm *to the deceased*. Some philosophers have maintained that one can be harmed after death (e.g., Aristotle). Even if this is true, however, it doesn't follow that this harm consists in harm to the body. If one maintained this view, the decomposition of the body itself would be a harm. *Pace* Socrates, there would be much to fear in death.

This suffices, it seems, for rejecting the first argument. That argument 1) is unclear regarding what a harm to the dead might involve, and 2) commits one to counter-intuitive results (i.e., that decomposition is a harm to the person who died).

A second argument one can produce against cannibalism involves the harm done to those who care about the cannibalized. Eating the flesh of a human being, the argument runs, would cause undue distress to the family of the cannibalized. Causing undue distress is *prima facie* wrong, and therefore cannibalism is *prima facie* wrong.

Let us grant that it is wrong to cause undue distress. Insofar as cannibalism causes undue distress, cannibalism is wrong. This, of course, only demonstrates that cannibalism is wrong because of consequences it has. If the negative consequences are removed, there is no longer an objection to ingesting human flesh. Thus, at least according to the above argument, it would not be morally impermissible to eat a corpse if there were no living persons who had an interest in the preservation of that corpse. Cannibalism would be acceptable under at least two sets of circumstances: 1) The cannibalized had no family or friends. 2) None of the family/friends object to cannibalizing the body. It thus appears that the second utilitarian argument does not reject cannibalism.

A final utilitarian argument expands on the second argument. Even if a corpse has no family, all human beings have an interest in the prevention of cannibalism. The reason for this is as follows: a society that permits the consumption of human flesh produces more unhappiness than happiness. We would not want to live in such a society.

This argument fails for a number of reasons. First, the argument relies on what seems to be a false empirical claim: namely, that cannibalism necessarily produces unhappiness. There is little reason to suspect that this is so. Societies that engage in cannibalism are not necessarily unhappy ones.

Nevertheless, it is probably true that *our* society would be made unhappy if cannibalism were permitted (think of the horror of discovering that soylent green is people). If this is the basis of the above claim, then the argument has an additional problem: namely, it makes the morality of cannibalism a matter of convention. Our reaction to cannibalism seems to stem solely from its taboo status. The fact that some behavior is taboo certainly does not entail that it is immoral. Thus, the above argument fails.

It is not surprising that there are no utilitarian arguments for establishing the moral impermissibility of cannibalism. The common intuitions here are not that the consumption of human flesh is morally wrong because it has bad consequences. The intuition is that it is wrong *in itself*. The above arguments cannot show this, as there are conditions under which the wrong-making consequences no longer obtain. If the legitimacy of the intuition is to be tested, then, the manner of our investigation must be changed: the question is *not* so much whether or not cannibalism has bad consequences, but whether or not there is something wrong with cannibalism *per se*.

### III. THREE KANTIAN ARGUMENTS AND ONE QUASI-KANTIAN ARGUMENT

The three best Kantian arguments against cannibalism invoke what is typically called “The Formula of Humanity.” This version of the categorical imperative holds that one ought to treat other human beings as ends, never merely as means. The consideration of these arguments will proceed from worst to best. Following this, a quasi-Kantian argument based on the sanctity of the body will be considered.

In cannibalizing another human, the first argument goes, the human is treated *merely* as a means (to, say, the satisfaction of our desires). In so doing, we are forgetting the dignity that is owed to each individual person. Thus, cannibalism violates the moral law.

This argument does not work. A corpse is not a human being—at least not in the robust sense of the term. A corpse is human flesh. Human flesh itself, one can respond, does not have dignity. Indeed, according to Kant, the very source of human dignity lies in the capacity of an agent to be autonomous—to act under laws that he himself authors. A corpse can do no such thing. As a being without autonomy, the corpse does not have dignity. Therefore, consumption of the corpse does not violate the formula of humanity: the corpse is but a thing, not a person.<sup>1</sup>

A related Kantian argument can here be made that involves the notion of respect. Respect for agents, from a Kantian point of view, involves enabling agents to formulate their own ends and to promote these ends where possible. This has relevance for cannibalism in several ways.

In one sense, cannibalism does not violate this respect. A corpse cannot form ends, and hence one cannot be required to abstain from eating the corpse on the grounds that one would not be promoting the ends of the corpse. Nevertheless,

one might think that there is a broader notion of respect that *is* violated by acts of cannibalism. There are two broader versions that might here be defended to show that cannibalism is morally wrong.

- (1) Respecting a person involves respecting the body of a person. To put this view succinctly: the intentional degradation of one's body after death disrespects that person.
- (2) Respecting a person involves respecting the morally permissible ends of a person even after that person is no longer present. Thus, on this view, our obligations to the living extend to obligations to the dead.

These views will be considered in turn.

It might well be true that degradation of one's body after death disrespects it, but this certainly is not obvious. Indeed, one might question this claim on two fronts: 1) One might object that it is not clear how it would be possible to disrespect the dead. One might argue that respect is always respect before another. After death, there is no longer an 'other,' and hence there is no longer an agent that can be an object of respect. 2) It is not clear why consuming a person would count as disrespect.

The second objection to this argument is the better of the two. There are certainly many indirect ways of showing respect and disrespect to a person—ways that do not require the presence of the person. This suggests that, despite lack of clarity in the notion of respect, it is possible to show respect for someone who is no longer alive. Ways of showing respect, however, are not simply arbitrary. That is, it is not sufficient to show respect or disrespect to simply *intend* to show respect or disrespect. Showing the bottoms of one's feet, raising one's middle finger, going without one's shirt, belching, etc., can exemplify both respect and disrespect, depending on the social customs in place. Given that there have been cannibalistic societies, there does not seem to be anything intrinsic to cannibalism that is disrespectful to persons. While we might all think of consuming someone as showing disrespect, and hence as something we should not do, this does not demonstrate that cannibalism is immoral. It is certainly bad etiquette to eat people, but that hardly means it is wrong.<sup>2</sup>

The second view of respect, it seems, is the more plausible of the two as a means of demonstrating the wrongness of cannibalism. This view highlights what many think: that there are obligations to the dead. The source of these obligations seems to be the antecedent ends of the deceased. If you ask another to donate your body to science, it seems that there is an obligation to donate your body to science simply in virtue of the fact that you requested this course of action while you were living. The fact that you will not *know* that your wish has not been followed, and, moreover, that you will not be harmed as a result of this, is irrelevant. If your ends are to be respected, one must respect them even if you are not present, where 'present' includes 'being alive.' To put this point another way:

being alive is not morally relevant when considering our obligations. Obligations to the living extend, as it were, beyond the grave.

This position seems to this author both right and philosophically important. One can possess ends that other agents must respect concerning how one wants to be treated, and what one wants to happen, after one dies. There are limits on these ends, to be sure, but there are some that require our respect: wanting to be cremated or buried, donating one's body to science, deciding in advance not to be kept alive after brain death, etc., are all obligations that we make on others that carry over into death. These ends do not lose their normative force simply because the deceased are no longer there to advocate them.

Obviously, there are cases where the wishes of the deceased can make no demands on the living: if one wants to be displayed on the kitchen table, or to be eaten by others, or to be remembered by every human being on Valentine's day, the living are under no obligation to do these things. The question, then, is the following: is cannibalism more like the former or the latter case? Is a request *not* to be cannibalized to be respected as an instance of respecting the ends of the deceased?

Most would agree that it would be morally wrong to eat another human being if they expressly claimed that they *would not want* such a thing to occur. To go against these wishes would be to violate the autonomy of the living after death. It would be to do something wrong.

The question is not obviously so easily answered when people do not express a wish one way or another. For the most part, people do not claim that they would object to being cannibalized—probably because the thought had never crossed their mind. Even granting that most people would object to being cannibalized, certainly not everyone would. This suggests that objections to being cannibalized are most likely contingent objections. If this is right, then cannibalism is only contingently wrong—that is, it is only wrong insofar as agents object to it. If reactions to cannibalism were to change, there would be nothing wrong with the behavior. Moreover, there is currently nothing wrong with the behavior provided that it does not violate the wishes of the deceased. The author of this article has no objections to being cannibalized. Thus, one could not claim that serving this author for dinner after his death would violate the respect owed to (even deceased) end-setters.

A respect for autonomy shows, it seems, that cannibalism cannot be defeated on Kantian grounds, provided that the agent cannibalized does not object to being cannibalized. Indeed, one can even defend certain acts of cannibalism on Kantian grounds: in cases where life depends on eating a corpse, such consumption is justified only if *the deceased would not have objected to the cannibalization*.

This author sees no morally relevant difference between the case where life depends on consuming human flesh and where it does not. In both cases, the action is acceptable *only if* the deceased would not have objected to the action.

The action is morally permissible only if it does not violate respect for the ends of the deceased.

There is a fourth, quasi-Kantian response to cannibalism, and one that can probably only be based on religious belief. This is a view regarding the sacredness of the body. On this view, the body itself has some type of intrinsic worth. Cannibalizing the body, the argument goes, violates the sanctity of the body, and hence is immoral.

There are obviously some problems with this view. It is not clear what the limits are for violating the sanctity of the body. If the limits are too narrow, the principle is one that nobody would accept (where do body piercing and tattoos fall? What about cremation?). The presence of these questionable cases, however, does not show that the argument does not work. It only shows that the principle in question needs to be refined if the argument is to go through. Grant that there is a clear criterion for the sanctity of the body that permits body piercing and tattoos, but excludes cannibalism.

Consider the following case: a patient is diagnosed with gangrene. An amputation is necessary. Few would claim that amputating the leg was immoral. As necessary to the preservation of the life of the patient, the removal of the leg is permissible. Now suppose that someone wants to consume the amputated leg. It is no longer part of the body, and hence its consumption would not violate the principle of the sanctity of the body. Thus, in this case at least, cannibalism would be acceptable.

This suggests that what the sanctity of the body principle excludes is *not* cannibalism, but unnecessary de-fleshing. If one removes flesh from a body when this is unnecessary, one has done something morally wrong. If one simply consumes flesh that is no longer attached to a body, one's action is not in violation of this principle.

Even if one does not accept this argument, there is another reason to reject the argument against cannibalism based on the sanctity of the body. The reason is that the argument begs the question. Call any argument circular in which one would not accept the support if one did not antecedently accept the conclusion. The argument is simply the following:

The body is sacred

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Cannibalism is wrong

One would not accept the support in this argument without already accepting the conclusion. Indeed, part of what it *means* to say that the body is sacred is that it cannot be abused, eaten, defiled, etc. The aim of these remarks is not to dispute the sacredness of the body (that has been done enough). Rather, the aim is to dispute the sacredness of this justification of the cannibalism prohibition.

The appeal to the sacredness of the body, then, does not work on three counts. 1) It is unclear what counts as violating the sanctity of the body. 2) It appears

that de-fleshing when unnecessary is a violation, but that consuming antecedently de-fleshed parts is not. The implication of this is that, strictly speaking, the principle of the sanctity of the body *does not* show that cannibalism is wrong. 3) The argument itself is circular.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

If there is a rational justification for the cannibalism prohibition, the author of this piece does not know what it is. Seven arguments for the immorality of cannibalism have been examined, and all have been found wanting. It does not follow from this that cannibalism is acceptable—but it does follow that the considered arguments cannot establish that it is *unacceptable*. The aim of this article is not to endorse or promote cannibalism. Rather, the aim is to call into question the legitimacy of a common moral intuition. If we are wrong about cannibalism, we might well be wrong about many other common moral intuitions. The above arguments seem also to apply to interaction of other kinds with dead bodies: necrophilia, for example, seems to be permissible if cannibalism is.

There might be other ways of defending the prohibition against cannibalism that do not involve rational justification. One might appeal to human phenomenology as the basis of a common sense view that cannibalism is to be rejected. On this account, one might even claim that cannibalistic tribes have a failure in phenomenology—they fail to see the face of the Other in the face of the dead.<sup>3</sup> This is certainly an open possibility—but it is a possibility that takes us away from the prospect of a rational justification for a common moral intuition. The status of the phenomenological view is an open question. The aim here was to show that the rejection of cannibalism as intrinsically wrong will not be based—and cannot be based—on our standard conceptions of obligation and harm, nor on the arguments we build upon them.<sup>4</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. If one objects that the person's soul is sacred, and is housed in the body, the response is clear: cannibalism *by definition* does not involve eating souls.

2. An initial reaction to defending cannibalism is frequently an expression of disgust. This response can be treated in the same way as the above case. There are many things that are disgusting that we do not regard as morally reprehensible: eating one's dinner with one's salad fork, picking one's nose, etc. As much as we might find nose-picking disgusting, all recognize that there is nothing immoral about it. We require an argument to conclude that something which violates the dictates of etiquette is also immoral. Because our "gut reactions" to breaches of etiquette can be as severe as our "gut reactions"

to breaches of morality, the gut reactions themselves cannot be a guide to the morality of an action.

3. C. Diamond advocates an analogous defense of the cannibalism prohibition in “Eating meat and eating people,” in *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991). She claims that our understanding of human agents precludes consuming them. Thus, the cannibalism prohibition can be explained by appeal to our form of life. This sounds exactly right—but it doesn’t touch on the defensibility of this aspect of our form of life. This is the topic of interest here.

4. The author would like to thank Michael Veber for helpful criticism of an earlier version of this paper. In addition, thanks go to Dee Suggs and Debbie Martin for some helpful discussions of this topic. The author hopes they will not be too horrified to find their names associated with a *defense* of cannibalism.