ON THE BODY THAT WAS A PERSON

A Meditation on Cannibalism, Necessity, Disgust, and the Limits of Human Possession

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I. The Permitted Dead

We bury the dead.

We burn them.

We preserve their ashes, scatter them upon landscapes, place their bodies in tombs, and sometimes surrender their remains to medical science.

We permit autopsies.

We recover bones from archaeological sites.

We preserve human tissue for research.

Under appropriate circumstances, organs may be recovered from the deceased and transplanted into the living.

These practices are not universally accepted, nor are they governed by identical legal or ethical principles.

Some require consent.

Some involve judicial or statutory authority.

Some arise from religious obligations.

Others reflect scientific or public health needs.

Their differences matter.

Yet each requires us to confront a common circumstance.

The person has died.

The body remains.

And the living must decide what may properly be done with it.

There is another possible treatment of human remains that commonly produces a particularly immediate reaction.

The body might be eaten.

Cannibalism is widely regarded as morally repugnant.

For many people, the wrongness of the act seems so apparent that explaining it feels unnecessary.

But the apparent certainty of a judgment does not establish the adequacy of its justification.

Why is cannibalism wrong?

Because it involves murder?

Not necessarily.

Because the deceased can suffer?

That depends upon what we mean by harm.

Because it violates consent?

Often, but what if consent was given?

Because it is disgusting?

Disgust is an experience. It is not, by itself, a complete moral argument.

Because the human body possesses a dignity that forbids its consumption?

Perhaps.

But then we must explain what dignity requires, whether it persists after death, and why it prohibits one treatment of remains while permitting another.

In his 2013 paper *Explaining the Wrongness of Cannibalism*, philosopher Mathew Lu acknowledges the difficulty of defending a prohibition that many regard as nearly self-evident.[1]

Lu does not conclude that cannibalism is morally acceptable. He argues that its wrongness can be explained through an account of virtue ethics broader than certain familiar approaches to moral obligation.

But the difficulty he identifies is important.

We may arrive at a sound moral conclusion without possessing an adequate explanation for it.

We may also inherit a conclusion whose apparent certainty discourages us from examining whether it applies to every circumstance we have placed beneath it.

Neither possibility should be ignored.

The purpose of inquiry is not necessarily to overturn the judgment.

It is to discover what the judgment means.

And what, precisely, it condemns.

II. The Problem of One Word

Cannibalism is generally understood as the consumption of a member of one's own species.

Human cannibalism concerns the consumption of human material by another human being.

The definition identifies a physical act.

It does not establish the circumstances in which the act occurred.

Consider four situations.

A person deliberately kills another for the purpose of consumption.

A group of starving survivors consumes the remains of someone who has already died.

A community incorporates the consumption of deceased relatives into its historical funerary practices.

A society develops an industry in which human beings are bred, slaughtered, and sold as food.

The same word may describe all four.

But the moral questions are different.

The first concerns homicide and the treatment of a victim's remains.

The second concerns necessity and obligations toward the dead.

The third concerns cultural meaning, mourning, health, and the relationships between the living and deceased.

The fourth concerns systematic exploitation and the deliberate reduction of persons to commodities.

We cannot resolve these questions merely by pointing to what the circumstances share.

The act of consumption does not establish that a killing occurred.

The existence of a ritual does not establish that the ritual was harmless.

The presence of necessity does not prove that every response to it was justified.

And the creation of a legal or commercial system does not establish that the conduct administered by that system is permissible.

The distinctions are not technical evasions.

They are necessary to moral judgment.

If we condemn a person for murder when no murder occurred, our judgment is mistaken regardless of our feelings about what they actually did.

If we defend an institution because its conduct is legally authorized, we may overlook the possibility that the authorization itself is unjust.

And if we describe an unfamiliar funerary practice solely through the disgust it produces in outsiders, we may fail to understand what the practice meant to those who participated in it.

A word can identify conduct without explaining its significance.

Cannibalism is such a word.

And its history makes the distinction especially important.

Anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum has examined the relationship between accounts of cannibalism and colonial constructions of supposedly civilized and primitive societies.[2]

Allegations of cannibalism have sometimes described documented practices.

They have also been exaggerated, misunderstood, or employed to establish a distinction between those presumed civilized and those cast as barbaric.

The distinction could then serve political purposes of its own.

A population accused of violating humanity might be treated as though it possessed less humanity.

This history does not justify dismissing every allegation as invention.

It requires us to examine the evidence.

What occurred?

Who described it?

How was the information obtained?

And what purposes did the description serve?

The question of whether a practice occurred must not be confused with the question of whether the accusation was used to justify something else.

Both matter.

And neither is answered by revulsion alone.

III. The Authority of Disgust

There are sound reasons for human beings to experience disgust.

Contamination, decay, disease, and other dangers may provoke reactions that serve protective purposes.

Disgust can also accompany deeply held moral convictions.

But the existence of a protective response does not establish that every object of the response is dangerous.

Nor does the intensity of disgust establish the degree of wrongdoing.

A person may recoil from something harmless.

Another may become accustomed to conduct that inflicts substantial injury.

The familiarity of an act does not make it right.

Its unfamiliarity does not make it wrong.

In *Abhorrence and Justification*, philosopher John Shand examines circumstances in which the strength of moral condemnation appears difficult to reconcile with the arguments offered to support it.[3]

Cannibalism provides one of his examples.

Consider a hypothetical situation.

A person encounters the remains of someone who has already died.

No killing occurred.

No coercion is involved.

No surviving person is distressed.

For purposes of the philosophical exercise, the usual questions concerning public health and other consequences are set aside.

The person consumes part of the remains.

Is the act wrong?

Many readers will answer immediately.

But the hypothetical asks them to explain the answer.

If the act involved no killing, murder cannot establish its wrongness.

If no coercion occurred, coercion cannot explain it.

If no living person experienced suffering, the suffering of the living cannot supply the justification without altering the circumstances.

One may still believe the act is wrong.

But the belief now requires another reason.

Perhaps the treatment violates an obligation toward the deceased.

Perhaps it expresses a form of disrespect that does not depend upon causing pain.

Perhaps its wrongness concerns the character of the act rather than its immediate consequences.

These possibilities deserve examination.

What cannot reasonably be done is to invoke a harm that the hypothetical specifically excludes and then declare the question settled.

There is, however, an important limitation.

A philosopher can construct circumstances in which every unwanted consequence has been removed by definition.

The world does not ordinarily offer such assurances.

Human remains exist within legal, familial, religious, and social relationships.

Their treatment can affect public trust, surviving relatives, and the expectations of people who care about what will happen to their own bodies after death.

The hypothetical may isolate a moral problem without establishing a practical permission.

That distinction should remain clear.

The possibility of an exceptional case does not, by itself, determine the wisdom of a general rule.

Yet the challenge remains valuable.

It asks us to distinguish the reasons for our judgment from the strength of our feelings about it.

And it reveals a possibility that should trouble anyone committed to careful moral reasoning.

We may sometimes know what we believe long before we know why.

IV. The Uses of the Dead

In 1982, philosopher Richard Routley published a paper bearing the deliberately provocative title *In Defence of Cannibalism I: Types of Admissible and Inadmissible Cannibalism*.[4]

Its argument is more careful than its title may initially suggest.

Routley does not begin by defending homicide.

He begins with practices already considered permissible.

Under established conditions, people may authorize the use of their organs after death.

Human remains may be used for medical purposes.

The body may be altered, divided, or subjected to procedures that would be impermissible without appropriate authority.

Routley asks why these uses are treated differently from consumption.

If a person may authorize the removal of organs for transplantation, why could that person not authorize the use of bodily material for nourishment?

The question is not answered merely by observing that transplantation is familiar and consumption is not.

Nor is it resolved by invoking the physical alteration of the body.

Both practices may involve substantial intervention upon human remains.

One possible distinction concerns purpose.

Organ transplantation may preserve another person's life.

Consumption ordinarily serves a different function.

That distinction is morally significant.

But it does not necessarily settle every case.

Nourishment can also become a matter of survival.

And some accepted uses of donated human material involve scientific research rather than the immediate preservation of an identifiable life.

Thus, the purposes of bodily use deserve examination rather than automatic classification.

Consent introduces another distinction.

Routley argues that the wishes of the deceased may bear substantially upon whether a particular treatment of remains constitutes disrespect.

A person who deliberately authorizes an action may not regard that action as an affront to their dignity.

Yet consent cannot settle every possible objection.

A person might authorize conduct that affects others.

Public health concerns might remain.

The creation of a commercial market in human remains might introduce incentives and pressures not present in an isolated act.

And the legitimacy of a particular use may depend upon more than the preferences of the individual whose body is involved.

Routley's argument therefore raises a question rather than ending the discussion.

If we permit one use of human remains but prohibit another, what morally relevant difference explains the distinction?

The answer cannot simply be that one practice is already permitted.

That would substitute the existence of a rule for its justification.

Nor can the answer simply be that one practice is disgusting.

That would return us to the difficulty identified by Shand.

We must identify what the difference protects.

Routley also challenges the assumption that consumption necessarily expresses contempt for the deceased.

An act may possess different meanings in different circumstances.

A treatment understood as desecration in one community may have been understood as care within another.

This does not establish that every practice is permissible.

But it weakens the claim that one physical act must always express the same moral attitude.

A body may be treated badly without being consumed.

And consumption, however unsettling to an observer, does not by itself establish what the participants intended.

The significance of an act cannot always be read directly from its physical description.

Purpose matters.

Consent matters.

Circumstances matter.

And the distinction between what an action does and what an action means may itself require examination.

V. The Species and the Principle

Routley's argument extends beyond the treatment of the dead.

He challenges a familiar division between human beings and other animals.

If consuming nonhuman animals is considered permissible while consuming human remains is categorically prohibited, what morally relevant difference supports the distinction?

The biological fact of belonging to *Homo sapiens* does not, by itself, explain why the treatment must differ.

One might appeal to intelligence.

Or rationality.

Or autonomy.

Or the capacity to form relationships.

Yet none of these qualities is distributed equally among human beings.

Nor are they entirely absent from other animals.

An account that grounds moral status solely in intellectual ability risks diminishing the standing of people with cognitive disabilities.

An account concerned principally with the capacity to suffer must take seriously the suffering of nonhuman animals.

The difficulty is not resolved by assuming that every creature possesses identical moral claims.

They need not.

The question is which differences matter, and why.

Routley argues that the collapse of a categorical moral division between humans and other animals places pressure upon conventional dietary assumptions.

But the challenge admits more than one response.

Someone might conclude that the prohibition against consuming human remains is too broad.

Another might conclude that the permission commonly granted to consume other animals is too broad.

A third might identify additional obligations arising from personhood, relationships, the wishes of the deceased, or the social significance of human remains.

The argument does not automatically determine which response is correct.

It requires the distinction to be defended.

There is a further difficulty.

A morally relevant difference may exist without belonging exclusively to one species.

The capacity to suffer is not uniquely human.

Neither is social attachment.

Some capacities associated with personhood may be present in different degrees among different creatures.

An ethical framework need not ignore those differences.

But it ought not to mistake a biological label for an explanation.

This is among the most important implications of Routley's argument.

The prohibition against consuming human beings cannot be adequately defended by assuming that the permissibility of consuming other animals requires no defense at all.

Both judgments may deserve examination.

And the examination may alter our understanding of one, the other, or both.

VI. The Purpose of Killing

Routley makes a further distinction that is essential to the discussion.

Killing someone for food is not necessarily the same act as consuming the remains of someone whose death occurred for another reason.

The difference concerns intention.

A person may die accidentally.

A person may die from illness.

A death may result from conduct undertaken in genuine self-defense.

In each case, the moral circumstances surrounding the death must be assessed independently.

Routley argues that where a killing was itself permissible, subsequent consumption may be considered separately under appropriate conditions.

But that proposition does not establish that every subsequent use of the body is permissible.

The justification of one action does not automatically confer unrestricted authority over everything that follows.

Nor does the possibility of permissible consumption establish a general permission to kill for food.

Indeed, Routley's paper explicitly distinguishes cases in which killing or allowing death is impermissible from those in which such conduct may be justified.

His effort is to construct categories of admissible and inadmissible conduct rather than defend cannibalism without qualification.

The distinction becomes particularly important in cases involving necessity.

In 1884, an English court considered the case of the yacht *Mignonette*.

Four members of its crew escaped in a lifeboat after the vessel was lost at sea.

Their provisions were inadequate.

After prolonged deprivation, two of the survivors, Thomas Dudley and Edwin Stephens, participated in the killing of the young cabin boy Richard Parker.

His body was subsequently consumed.

The survivors were rescued.

Dudley and Stephens were prosecuted for murder.

In *R v Dudley and Stephens*, the court rejected necessity as a justification for deliberately killing an innocent person to preserve the lives of others.[5]

The legal distinction is fundamental.

The prosecution concerned the killing of Richard Parker.

It did not establish that every instance of consuming the remains of someone already deceased constituted murder.

The defendants had faced a genuine emergency.

Their suffering was severe.

But the court did not accept that their circumstances granted them authority to take Parker's life.

The proposed justification raised an unsettling problem.

Who was entitled to decide that one person should die so others might live?

What measure would determine whose life could be sacrificed?

Age?

Strength?

Health?

The number of people who might benefit?

And what would prevent those who stood to benefit from selecting someone less capable of resistance?

Parker was the youngest and among the most vulnerable members of the group.

His selection was inseparable from the unequal distribution of power within the lifeboat.

The case therefore concerned more than hunger.

It concerned the authority claimed by one person over the life of another.

Necessity may explain why conduct occurred.

It may influence how responsibility is judged.

In certain circumstances, necessity may form part of a legal justification or excuse.

But explanation, excuse, and justification are different conclusions.

A genuine emergency does not establish that every response to it is permissible.

Nor does the assertion of necessity relieve us of the obligation to examine alternatives.

This distinction matters when comparing the *Mignonette* with survival situations in which people consumed the remains of individuals who had already died.

The circumstances are not morally interchangeable.

The intentional creation of a victim introduces a wrong that cannot be attributed merely to the later treatment of the body.

The fact that someone is starving does not make that difference disappear.

Yet neither should the desperation of people facing death be discussed without seriousness.

Moral judgment need not pretend that every choice is made under ordinary conditions.

It must nevertheless distinguish the circumstances that explain an act from those that justify it.

And it must remain attentive to the danger of allowing those who possess power to define whose sacrifice has become necessary.

VII. The Dead Who Were Loved

Some historical practices of cannibalism cannot adequately be explained through hunger, homicide, or domination.

Among the Fore people of Papua New Guinea, certain mortuary practices involved the consumption of deceased relatives.

Research has documented the relationship between these practices, kinship obligations, beliefs concerning death, and the transmission of kuru, a fatal prion disease.[6]

The consequences of kuru were devastating.

Yet the medical history alone does not explain the cultural meaning of the practices associated with its spread.

In important accounts of Fore mortuary customs, consumption of deceased relatives could express love, care, and concern for the proper passage of the dead.

The practice was embedded in relationships and understandings of the body that differed substantially from those familiar to many contemporary Western readers.

This presents a difficulty for any account that treats cannibalism as necessarily expressive of contempt.

The participants did not invariably understand themselves to be dishonoring the deceased.

The act could belong to a practice of mourning.

This does not eliminate the question of harm.

Kuru demonstrates that a practice may possess profound cultural meaning while producing grave medical consequences.

Nor does respect for cultural difference require suspending ethical inquiry.

The significance of intention must be considered alongside the consequences of conduct.

But those questions should not be confused.

A practice may be undertaken lovingly and still cause harm.

An outsider may condemn a practice without adequately understanding what its participants believed they were doing.

And a description may be accurate in identifying an act while incomplete in explaining its meaning.

These distinctions are not unique to cannibalism.

Human societies have developed many forms of funerary care.

Burial, cremation, preservation, exposure, and other mortuary practices reflect different understandings of what remains of a person after death.

They are not identical in medical, legal, or ethical significance.

But their variety should caution us against assuming that one familiar outward form exhausts the possibilities of respect.

What one community considers an appropriate treatment of the dead may appear incomprehensible to another.

That difference does not establish that all practices are equally justified.

It does establish that familiarity is not itself a sufficient ethical argument.

And where historical descriptions have been employed to portray entire populations as less than human, the responsibility to distinguish observation from judgment becomes especially important.

A society does not demonstrate its respect for humanity merely by condemning another society's treatment of the dead.

It must also examine how it treats the living.

VIII. The Moral Status of What Remains

We have considered the physical act.

We have considered intention, consent, species membership, necessity, and cultural meaning.

But a central question remains.

What obligations survive a person's death?

A living person can suffer.

They can express preferences, withdraw consent, and defend their interests.

They can make promises and require others to honor them.

Death changes those circumstances.

The deceased cannot experience injury or humiliation in the manner of a living person.

Does it follow that nothing done after death can wrong them?

Consider a person who requests a particular burial.

Another promises to honor that request.

After the person's death, the promise is deliberately broken.

Suppose no surviving relative learns of the decision.

Suppose the deceased never anticipated the betrayal.

Has a wrong occurred?

One possible answer is that the promise created an obligation while the person was alive.

The obligation does not necessarily disappear because the beneficiary can no longer demand its fulfillment.

Another answer concerns the character of the person who breaks the promise.

A third concerns the importance of sustaining practices through which people can trust that their final wishes will be respected.

These explanations differ.

But each demonstrates why the absence of a presently suffering victim does not necessarily settle every moral question.

We routinely recognize obligations concerning matters that will occur after someone's death.

Wills are administered.

Certain promises remain binding.

Instructions concerning the disposition of remains may carry legal significance.

Confidentiality may continue.

These practices do not require treating a corpse as though it possessed every capacity and right of a living person.

They do suggest that death does not automatically extinguish every obligation arising from a person's life.

This is where Mathew Lu's response to the philosophical literature becomes important.

Lu argues that the wrongness of cannibalism can be explained through a broadly Aristotelian account of virtue ethics and a conception of moral value more expansive than those emphasized by some consequentialist and neo-Kantian approaches.[1]

The proposal matters because it challenges an assumption underlying certain defenses of cannibalism.

The assumption is that an act cannot be wrong unless some identifiable person suffers harm or experiences a violation of rights.

Virtue ethics permits a different kind of inquiry.

What does the action express?

What kind of relationship does it establish between the actor and the object of their action?

Is the conduct consistent with the dispositions and forms of respect appropriate to human life?

These questions need not be answered solely by measuring consequences.

But the virtue-ethical approach must also explain itself.

If consuming human remains is said to express disrespect, why must that be so?

How should the argument account for a person who consented?

What of a community whose historical funerary practices understood consumption as an expression of care?

An appeal to virtue cannot simply rename the intuition it seeks to justify.

It must explain the connection between the conduct and the moral character attributed to it.

The disagreement with Routley therefore remains substantial.

Routley challenges the assumption that consumption itself introduces an independent moral wrong in every conceivable circumstance.

Lu maintains that a broader understanding of moral value can explain a prohibition that narrower accounts struggle to defend.

Neither position becomes correct merely because its conclusion feels more comfortable.

The burden of explanation belongs to both.

And perhaps the underlying difficulty is that human remains occupy a peculiar position in moral life.

The body is no longer a living person.

Yet it is not generally treated as an ordinary object available for unrestricted appropriation.

Its significance may arise from promises, relationships, cultural obligations, or a conception of dignity that does not end with the capacity for conscious experience.

These possibilities are subjects of philosophical disagreement.

But the disagreement is not evidence that the body is morally meaningless.

It is evidence that our obligations to the dead require explanation.

IX. The Flesh That Became Inventory

Agustina Bazterrica's novel *Tender Is the Flesh* imagines a society in which human beings have become the raw material of an organized industry.[7]

Its horror extends beyond the consumption of human flesh.

The machinery of the institution is what makes the imagined world so disturbing.

There are classifications.

There are procedures.

There are commercial transactions.

There are workers performing assigned functions.

There is language that allows the system to describe its operations without continually acknowledging the humanity of those subjected to them.

People become categories.

Categories become inventory.

Inventory becomes merchandise.

The transformation is not only physical.

It is administrative.

The novel presents a society that has developed the means to treat human beings as products while preserving the appearance of ordinary economic life.

Its institutions function.

Its procedures are intelligible.

Its participants perform tasks that have become routine.

But the routine character of the conduct does not make the conduct right.

A system may be orderly and profoundly unjust.

Its records may be complete.

Its terminology may be consistent.

Its regulations may be enforced.

None of these facts establishes the moral legitimacy of its underlying purpose.

This is where the novel's treatment of cannibalism differs fundamentally from the philosophical hypotheticals considered earlier.

Shand examines whether consumption is wrong when the familiar sources of harm have been removed.

Routley examines whether a categorical prohibition can survive distinctions concerning consent, the status of the dead, and the purposes of an action.

Bazterrica depicts an institution in which extensive harm has been normalized.

The questions are not interchangeable.

The dystopian horror does not depend upon proving that every imaginable consumption of human remains is intrinsically wrong.

It depends upon the systematic destruction of the distinction between a person and a commodity.

The person disappears before the body does.

Not in fact.

The person remains present.

The disappearance occurs within the institution's way of describing and treating them.

A classification is substituted for recognition.

A commercial interest is substituted for obligation.

A procedure is substituted for moral judgment.

And the institution behaves as though the transformation of its language has transformed the nature of the human being before it.

This is a danger extending beyond the imagined society of the novel.

Institutions necessarily classify.

They establish categories, eligibility rules, procedures, and records.

Such practices can promote fairness, consistency, and accountability.

But they can also obscure the individuals upon whom institutional decisions fall.

The existence of a classification does not eliminate the person classified.

The legality of a procedure does not establish its justice.

And the successful administration of a practice cannot substitute for an examination of whether that practice should exist.

The question is not merely whether an institution has permission to act.

It is whether the permission was justified.

X. What Permission Cannot Establish

Law and morality frequently overlap.

They are not identical.

A legal prohibition may protect life, bodily autonomy, public health, the integrity of human remains, or other recognized interests.

But the existence of a prohibition does not necessarily provide a complete philosophical explanation for it.

Nor does the absence of an express prohibition establish that an act is morally permissible.

In the United States, legal questions concerning cannibalism depend upon jurisdiction and circumstance.

Laws governing homicide, abuse or desecration of human remains, and public health may be relevant.

There is no reason to assume that every possible circumstance falls beneath one uniform criminal rule.

Nor should the lack of a general prohibition be mistaken for unrestricted permission.

Three distinctions remain important.

An act may be understandable.

It may be legally permissible.

It may be morally justified.

These propositions do not necessarily follow from one another.

Desperation may make conduct understandable without justifying it.

A practice may fall outside the terms of a particular criminal prohibition while remaining ethically troubling.

An institution may conduct itself according to law even where the law reflects a serious injustice.

Legal precision matters because different prohibitions protect different interests.

The wrongness of murder cannot automatically explain the wrongness of conduct involving someone who has already died.

A rule protecting public health serves a different purpose from one requiring respect for a deceased person's expressed wishes.

A prohibition against coercion is not identical to a principle governing the dignity of human remains.

These interests may converge.

But their convergence should not obscure their differences.

The same discipline applies to moral reasoning.

To defend a prohibition, we should identify the interests it protects.

To challenge one, we should acknowledge the interests that may justify it.

And to consider an exception, we should explain why the circumstances differ from those the prohibition was intended to address.

The purpose is neither to make every taboo legally enforceable nor to dismiss every inherited restriction as irrational.

It is to distinguish moral judgment from moral assumption.

The law may tell us what conduct is forbidden.

It does not relieve us of the responsibility to ask why.

XI. The Obligation to Explain

I began with a practice whose wrongness appeared self-evident.

Cannibalism.

The word seemed sufficient.

It evoked disgust, violence, and a boundary that civilized society was understood not to cross.

But the inquiry became less straightforward when I attempted to explain the prohibition.

Murder offered a compelling objection.

Yet not every instance involved murder.

Coercion offered another.

Yet not every instance involved coercion.

Harm to living persons explained many concerns.

Yet philosophers could imagine circumstances in which those harms were absent.

Consent complicated the question.

So did necessity.

So did the moral interests of the dead.

And the comparison between human beings and other animals required an examination of the principles by which moral status is assigned.

These difficulties do not establish that cannibalism is generally acceptable.

They establish that the word gathers together acts involving different kinds of moral responsibility.

Some are wrong for reasons that can be identified with considerable clarity.

Others present questions that remain philosophically contested.

A serious moral inquiry ought to distinguish them.

It should not invent a killing where none occurred.

It should not treat the absence of a killing as proof that nothing else matters.

It should not presume that an unfamiliar practice expresses contempt when its participants understood it as an obligation of care.

Nor should it allow an institution to conceal exploitation beneath the appearance of administrative order.

There is a temptation to regard moral certainty as a virtue in itself.

Sometimes certainty is justified.

But certainty does not excuse careless reasoning.

And where our judgments carry consequences for other human beings, the responsibility to explain them becomes especially important.

A prohibition may protect a genuine moral interest even when its justification is difficult to articulate.

An apparent exception may reveal the limits of a rule without establishing that the rule should be abandoned.

And a practice may be condemned for reasons that have little to do with the emotional response it produces.

The appropriate response is examination.

We should ask what occurred.

We should ask who was harmed.

We should ask whether consent existed.

We should ask what obligations survived death.

We should ask whether necessity was genuine.

And we should ask whether the language used to describe a person has concealed the person being described.

The answers may differ.

That does not make moral judgment impossible.

It makes precision necessary.

I do not find that this inquiry has eliminated my revulsion.

Nor do I find that the persistence of revulsion resolves the inquiry.

What has changed is my understanding of the responsibility that accompanies condemnation.

It is not enough to say that something is wrong because we have always believed it to be so.

Nor is it enough to abandon the judgment because its defense requires more thought than expected.

We ought to know what we are condemning.

We ought to know why.

And when our judgment concerns the treatment of a human body, we ought to remember that the body was not always silent.

There was a person.

A person who lived through it.

Who possessed interests, relationships, purposes, and a history.

A person whose life cannot be reduced to the physical material that remained after death.

That recognition may not settle every question concerning the disposition of human remains.

But it gives us a reason to take the questions seriously.

And perhaps that is where the inquiry ought to end.

Not with the appetite.

Not with the disgust.

Not even with the prohibition.

But with the obligation to explain what we owe one another.

Including when the other can no longer ask.

Sources and Notes

[1] Mathew Lu. “Explaining the Wrongness of Cannibalism.” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2013): 433–458. DOI: 10.5840/acpq201387332.

Lu examines arguments challenging the moral prohibition against cannibalism and develops an account of its wrongness grounded in Aristotelian virtue ethics.

[2] Shirley Lindenbaum. “Thinking About Cannibalism.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 475–498. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143758.

An examination of anthropological approaches to cannibalism, including its representation in colonial discourse and the construction of distinctions between supposedly civilized and primitive peoples.

[3] John Shand. “Abhorrence and Justification.” *Ethical Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2010): 515–528. DOI: 10.2143/EP.17.4.2059844.

Examines the relationship between intense moral abhorrence and the rational justification of moral judgments, including hypothetical cases involving cannibalism.

[4] Richard Routley. *In Defence of Cannibalism I: Types of Admissible and Inadmissible Cannibalism.* Discussion Papers in Environmental Philosophy, no. 2. Canberra: Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences, 1982.

Primary text examined for this essay. Particularly relevant are the discussion of admissible uses of the dead and consent (pp. 5–11), the distinction between killing and subsequent consumption (pp. 16–22), and the examination of morally relevant differences among species (pp. 1–5, 31–39).

[5] *R v Dudley and Stephens*. (1884) 14 QBD 273; [1884] EWHC 2 (QB).

English criminal-law decision rejecting necessity as a justification for the deliberate killing of an innocent person to preserve the lives of others.

[6] Jerome T. Whitfield, Wandagi H. Pako, John Collinge, and Michael P. Alpers. “Mortuary Rites of the South Fore and Kuru.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 363, no. 1510 (2008): 3721–3724. DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2008.0074.

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These studies examine Fore mortuary practices, their cultural significance, and the history of kuru transmission.

[7] Agustina Bazterrica. *Tender Is the Flesh*. Originally published in Spanish as *Cadáver exquisito* (2017). Translated into English by Sarah Moses (2020).

A dystopian novel examining the industrial commodification of human beings and the institutional normalization of violence.