

THERE'S SOME FETISH IN YOUR ETHICS: A LIMITED DEFENSE OF PURITY REASONING IN MORAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT: Call the ethos understanding rightness in terms of spiritual purity and piety, and wrongness in terms of corruption and sacrilege, the “fetish ethic.” Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues suggest that this ethos is particularly salient to political conservatives and non-liberal cultures around the globe. In this essay, I point to numerous examples of moral fetishism in mainstream academic ethics. Once we see how deeply “infected” our ethical reasoning is by fetishistic intuitions, we can respond by (1) repudiating the fetishistic impulse, by (2) “sublimating” our fetishism into liberal rationales, or by (3) accepting the fetishism on its own terms. Of these options, I argue that sublimating our fetishism is not advisable, and that embracing our ethical fetishism isn’t as obviously misguided as some suggest.

I. INTRODUCTION

Building upon work by anthropologist Richard Shweder and psychologist Paul Rozin, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have argued in a number of papers that psychological, anthropological, and ethological research suggests that there are a handful of ethical “primitives” or “foundations” that serve as the building-blocks for all ethical thought across cultures. This Moral Foundation Theory (of MFT) has borne interesting fruit, for Haidt et al. have evidence that social liberals and Western intellectuals privilege two of these foundations (“fairness/reciprocity” and “harm/care”) at the expense of the other three (“ingroup/loyalty,” “authority/respect,” and “purity/sanctity”). According to Haidt and his colleagues, liberals and Western intellectuals—or to use a bit of recent parlance, the “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic) (Heinrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010)—are indeed oddballs

since they narrowed the ethical to the first two foundations of harm/care and fairness/reciprocity. The non-WEIRD around the globe, and self-described social conservatives, do not. These latter groups tend to see rightness and wrongness as determined by reasons having to do with all of these types of considerations.

The MFT research is philosophically significant. If MFT is correct, then ethicists think WEIRDly. Should that fact (if it is a fact) undermine our confidence in our ethical research? On the other hand, MFT claims that these foundations are innate and powerfully intuitive, and thus likely to influence the reasoning even of ethicists who consciously reject these foundations. What should we do if we find ourselves thinking along the lines of these more exotic moral foundations? I approach these questions by focusing on one of Haidt's non-liberal ethical primitives: the purity/sanctity module. I argue that its inputs, outputs, and characteristic inference-patterns form a complex I call "fetish ethics." Although the principles and putative values of the fetish ethic do indeed appear at odds with the professed values and modes of valuing promulgated in the academy (as Haidt and his colleagues maintain), one nonetheless can observe a fair bit of fetishism in mainstream academic ethics. So one point of this essay is that introspection of our intuitions in light of fetish-ethical research, and a close reading of some mainstream ethical discourses, suggest that although our *professed* values and principles may privilege the first two foundations, our *actual* values and principles may well be less WEIRD than we are told—or indeed, tell ourselves.

Once we recognize how deeply influenced we are by fetishistic intuitions, we can respond by (1) repudiating the fetishistic impulse, by (2) "sublimating" our fetishism into rationales consonant with liberal values and principles, or by (3) accepting our fetishism on its own terms. Of these options, I argue that sublimating our fetishism is not advisable, and that the most obvious objections against embracing fetishism are not compelling. So although our fetish-ethical reasoning is presently primitive, we should be receptive to the possibility that some aspects of the moral domain (whatever that domain may consist in) are best described in fetish-ethical terms.

Before launching in, I would like to stress two points. First, what Rozin, Shweder, Haidt, and their colleagues are pointing to aren't just non-liberal varieties of values, but markedly different *modes of valuing* evaluands, i.e., ways of responding to whatever is seen as good or bad. Thus, these foundations prescribe radically different affective and behavioral responses to offense, depending on the foundation in question. In shorthand, then, a foundation is constituted not just by characteristic dispositions to "value," but also dispositions to accept characteristic "principles" saying how to respond to those values. Second and relatedly, what Rozin, Shweder, Haidt and their colleagues are talking about are not ethical theories. Ethical theories are philosophers' attempts to characterize the limits of right action in light of the ethical "data," which we might think of as intuitions about what things are valuable and what moral principles are true. Shweder's, Rozin's, and Haidt's "foundations" or "ethics," in contrast, are more-or-less theoretical posits that organize and systematize types of intuitions we have.¹ So whereas some future philosopher may wish to advance a fetish-ethical *theory* that recognizes only the

values and principles of Haidt et al.'s purity/sanctity, that is emphatically not what is being attempted here. For my part, I feel the fetish ethic at best only captures part of the truth. The point is rather that most of us find ourselves with strong fetish-ethical intuitions, and that the arguments against an ethos built on these intuitions are not (yet) compelling. Being uncertain about its theoretical value is actually the reasonable stance at this point.

II. LIBERALISM AS WINNOWING THE ETHICAL DOMAIN

In a series of papers, Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have appealed to psychological, anthropological, and ethological research to argue that evolutionary pressures have left us with a handful of ethical “primitives” or “foundations” that serve as the building blocks to all ethical thought (Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993; Haidt and Graham 2007; Haidt and Joseph 2007; Haidt and Graham 2009; Haidt 2012).² These primitives are *modular* insofar as each primitive is directed at a unique domain of concern and processes its inputs in unique ways.³ They are *innate* insofar as we all are predisposed to moralize according to the dictates of these modules: although socialization plays a large role in fixing what we will in fact see as morally relevant (e.g., the “harm/care” module directs us to care about harm, but *whose* harm is somewhat shaped by our culture or self-training), these predispositions are robust enough to have some content to them (e.g., we care about harming children, especially).

Three foundations are particularly important for this essay, and it might be beneficial to quote parts of Haidt and Graham's (2007) summaries of them. The first two will sound familiar.

Harm/care: The long history of mammalian evolution has shaped maternal brains to be sensitive to signs of suffering in one's own offspring. In many primate species, particularly humans, this sensitivity has extended beyond the mother-child relationship so that all normally developed individuals dislike seeing suffering in others.

Fairness/reciprocity: The long history of alliance formation and cooperation among unrelated individuals in many primate species has led to the evolution of a suite of emotions that motivate reciprocal altruism, including anger, guilt, and gratitude. . . . Because people feel these emotions when they observe or engage in reciprocal interactions, all cultures have developed virtues related to fairness and justice.

The third foundation will be our focus:

Purity/sanctity: Against the long background of primate evolution, the human transition to a heavily meat-based diet occurred quite recently. . . . The move to meat, which may have included scavenging carcasses, coincided with the rapid growth of the human frontal cortex, and these two changes (meat eating and cortical growth) appear to have given humans—and only humans—the emotion of disgust. . . . Disgust appears to function as a guardian of the body in all cultures, responding to elicitors that are biologically or culturally linked to disease transmission (feces, vomit, rotting corpses, and animals whose habits

associate them with such vectors). However, in most human societies disgust has become a social emotion as well, attached at a minimum to those whose appearance (deformity, obesity, or diseased state), or occupation (the lowest castes in caste-based societies are usually involved in disposing of excrement or corpses) makes people feel queasy. In many cultures, disgust goes beyond such contaminant-related issues and supports a set of virtues and vices linked to bodily activities in general, and religious activities in particular. Those who seem ruled by carnal passions (lust, gluttony, greed, and anger) are seen as debased, impure, and less than human, while those who live so that the soul is in charge of the body (chaste, spiritually minded, pious) are seen as elevated and sanctified. (Haidt and Graham 2007, 104–106)

Again, to most readers, only some of these foundations underwrite “moral” or “ethical” thoughts and feelings. Haidt and his colleagues base their case for expanding our conceptual notions of what counts as “ethical” largely upon their cross-cultural experiments and their review of anthropological evidence (a sliver of which I canvass below). But they believe these primitives, once in hand, help explain some cultural differences right here at home. Studies suggest that political conservatives are more likely to make moral judgments guided by the whole panoply of ethical intuition-types listed above, whereas self-described liberals strongly favor the deliverances of their harm/care and fairness/reciprocity modules. Their research also suggests that academics tend to conceive of morality in liberal terms.⁴ These findings are to be expected if liberalism itself can be (roughly) seen as committed to equally-distributed rights protective of personal liberties wherein such rights are infringed only to prevent harm. Failure to show how an act *harms* someone or violates a *liberty* or *autonomy*-based right leaves the liberally-minded person presuming the action to be morally permissible, even if distasteful. For instance, liberal Westerners are as apt as anyone to be disgusted by the thought of consensual incest (provided there is no chance of pregnancy). The difference is that the liberal is less apt to condemn the practice morally (Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993).

III. DISGUST, MAGICAL REASONING, AND FETISH ETHICS

Disgust has become a topic of serious interest to empirically-based psychology in recent decades, with results that are both fascinating and of immediate use to philosophers interested in how much ethical weight to give the emotion. The most influential work on disgust has been done by Paul Rozin and his colleagues, whose work I follow somewhat closely in this section.⁵ Rozin has pieced together the various perspectives on disgust into the following picture (Rozin and Fallon 1987; Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000). First, there is something Rozin calls “core disgust,” which in its most primitive form is a *sui generis* reaction to an object of potential oral intake, one that is highly “ideational” in that the history or mere category of the object plays a large role in whether it is deemed offensive or not (Rozin and Fallon 1987). This “core” of disgust emanates in many directions. The targets of disgust for those prone to feel it will expand outwards to include not just food or items we fear ingesting, but any number of objects that can violate our “body envelope,” especially through unwilling entry into any of our orifices. Even

more distant from core disgust is disgust aimed at things merely associated with the noxious items, such as a disgust of flies or dogs because they consume feces (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 37). Perhaps more distant yet is our disgust of objects which merely resemble disgusting objects, such as chocolate shaped like feces or the plastic vomit sold at novelty shops (Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff 1986). Distant though they be, these triggers nonetheless can be understood in terms of core disgust.

On the other hand, some other widespread and cross-cultural elicitors of disgust—strange sexual behaviors, physical deformations, or severe handicaps—are not easily explained by core disgust.⁶ This is where, for Rozin and his colleagues, the psychoanalytic exposition of disgust, which understands disgust as a repudiation of our “animal-nature,” comes to the fore (Angyal 1941). On this view, we regulate the ways we eat, procreate, eliminate wastes, and dispose of our dead with such fastidiousness because eating, procreating, defecating, and dying each, so to speak, rubs our animal nature in our faces. By regulating these domains of human life via the mechanism of natural and learned disgust reactions, we set ourselves apart from the animals and those who act “like animals.”⁷

After core-disgust and animal-nature disgust, the third level of disgustingness concerns what Rozin and his colleagues call “interpersonal disgust.” Rozin has helped show that many respondents are disinclined to wear a sterilized sweater said to be previously worn by an AIDS victim. This is predictable enough, given that AIDS is an infectious disease and that people tend to steer more clear of known infectious diseases than is reasonable. But fascinatingly, respondents have been shown to be *less* repulsed by a cleaned sweater worn by an AIDS sufferer *if* the victim was said to be a heterosexual who contracted the disease through a transfusion. Likewise, a sweater worn by a healthy murderer makes us less likely to wear it than otherwise, they find. This indicates a new level of disgust directed toward what Rozin calls “moral taint” (Rozin, Markwith, and McCauley 1994).⁸ Rozin and his colleagues conclude that “this form of disgust clearly discourages contact with other human beings who are not intimates, and can serve the purpose of maintaining social distinctiveness and social hierarchies” (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000, 643).

Fourth and finally, “moral disgust” has as its common elicitors sleazy politicians, child abusers, cold-blooded murderers or killers of particularly deviant or diabolical sorts, hypocrites, and traitors. These targets are particularly interesting because they are straightforwardly reactions to those whom we would normally consider to have done something ethically wrong. One theory of why these targets elicit disgust is that these people instantiate a sort of inhumanity or sickness and thus excite the previously-discussed fear of our animality. But the dimension of disgust the social psychologists wish to emphasize is its social, regulative one. For them, the disgusting types of people and the situations they bring about are spiritual analogues of feces, threatening to pollute our souls or our “body politic” (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000, 643–644). That we are disgusted by such acts and especially by their performers suggests that we elevated the aim of our disgust reactions to cope with unwholesomeness not in foods but in ourselves and each

other. Rozin and his colleagues hold that our evolved disgust-reactions to potential orally-ingested contaminants was drafted for the purposes of norming, evaluating, and consensus-building on social, ethical, and aesthetic matters. They draw an analogy between disgust and vocal abilities: just as our teeth and tongues, which are essential to speech, did not evolve to aid in speaking but for eating, our very primitive disgust-reactions provided a convenient preadaptation for creatures in our circumstances—highly social animals in need of a way to talk about and agree on what to promote or do (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000, 644–655).

This leads us to the most remarkable turn of the present research. Rozin and his colleagues see moralized disgust as importing the inference-patterns of core-disgust. Recall that people tend to be disgusted by items touched by disgusting objects or even resembling such objects. These patterns of disgust-reactions carried over into moralized disgust. They also were drafted into our primitive thinking about the natural world. In short, these inference-patterns formed the essence of what is commonly thought of as “magical thinking.”

It will prove worthwhile to say a bit more about how magical thinking works. Of magical thinking, James Frazer writes in his seminal *Golden Bough*:

Side by side with the view of the world as pervaded by spiritual forces, primitive man has another conception in which we may detect a germ of the modern notion of natural law or the view of nature as a series of events occurring in an invariable order without the intervention of personal agency. The germ of which I speak is involved in that sympathetic magic, as it may be called, which plays a large part in most systems of superstition. (Frazer [1890] 1981, 9)

Sympathetic magic is so-called because it manifests various inference-patterns suggestive of a sort of “sympathy” between multiple objects related in the right ways. Following Frazer, Rozin and others drawing a connection between disgust and sympathetic magic tend to see magical reasoning as characterized by two main inference-patterns. The first law is that *like produces like*—the “similarity” principle. Americans are most familiar with this superstition in the form of voodoo dolls one may stab in order to inflict pain on the person the dolls were crafted to resemble. Or one might contemplate Frazer’s delightful account of how magically-minded people around the globe use various imitation techniques to summon rain: they might spit in the air to simulate rain, drum in the trees to imitate thunder, or dump water on a high place to duplicate the rivulets of rain (Frazer [1890] 1981, 12–22).

The second law of sympathetic magic Frazer called “contagion.” Contagion holds that holy or spiritually powerful objects are, as it were, spiritually infectious. Frazer tells the story of a Maori chief who, upon finding his blanket too heavy, threw it off a cliff. A missionary accompanying the chief asked him why he didn’t leave the valuable blanket on a tree so someone else could use it. According to the missionary, the chief’s response was that he destroyed the blanket from “‘fear of its being taken by another . . . for if it were worn, his tapu’ (i.e., his spiritual power communicated by contact to the blanket and through the blanket to the man) ‘would kill the person.’” Or consider how the literal parts of a holy object or of a person are considered a stand-in for whole: “Again,” Frazer writes, “magical sympathy is supposed to exist between a man and any severed portion of his person, as his hair

or nails; so that whoever gets possession of hair or nails may work his will, at any distance, upon the person from whom they were cut” (Frazer [1890] 1981, 169).

These laws of sympathetic magic regulate the transmission of not only the disvalue of moral taint, but also positive value. For instance, it is a very common belief that by eating the heart of brave warrior or sexual organ of a creature viewed as sexually powerful one will incorporate the relevant potency into oneself. Rozin calls this positive contamination “transvaluation” and claims that, as one might suspect, one experiences an increased attraction toward transvalued objects just as one has an increased disgust reaction toward contaminated objects (Rozin and Fallon 1987, 32). People tend to find food cooked by loved ones more appetizing and to value especially clothes handled or worn by people they like. As any viewer of the *Antique Roadshow* can attest, a proven connection to a historical figure—especially a physical connection—can dramatically increase an item’s worth. Much the same phenomenon is seen when adolescents vow never to wash a cheek after being kissed by that special someone after the school dance.

Although it is sometimes noted that it is easier to contaminate than to make pure and that purity-based reasoning sometimes reflects this (Kelly 2011, 20), exceptional purity or holiness can efficiently cleanse away contaminants. Consider the Biblical story of the hemorrhaging woman who was instantly and involuntarily healed by Jesus:

But as He went, the multitudes thronged Him. Now a woman, having a flow of blood for twelve years, who had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any, came from behind and touched the border of His garment. And immediately her flow of blood stopped. And Jesus said, “Who touched Me?” When all denied it, Peter and those with him said, “Master, the multitudes throng and press You, and You say, ‘Who touched Me?’” But Jesus said, “Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me.” Now when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before Him, she declared to Him in the presence of all the people the reason she had touched Him and how she was healed immediately. And He said to her, “Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has made you well. Go in peace.” (Luke 8:43–48)

The ancient Hebrews were deeply physically and spiritually troubled by female genital bleeding, as numerous passages in the Jewish scriptures make clear. Since the sick woman’s “pollution” poses no difficulty for the cleansing power of Jesus, Jesus must be superlatively holy.

The orthodoxy on disgust once saw the emotion and the types of concerns natural to it as constituting a distinct ethical approach. In part, this is because Rozin and his colleagues’ view that disgust is the moral emotion for certain sorts of moral wrongdoing was seen to comport nicely with anthropologist Richard Shweder’s independently-arrived at theory of moral emotions. Shweder and his colleagues called their view the “CAD Triad Hypothesis,” where “CAD” stands for *contempt*, *anger*, and *disgust*—the three most salient “other-critical” emotions. (These emotions are paired with the self-critical emotions *shame*, *guilt*, and *embarrassment*.) Based upon many studies and experiments he conducted in India, Shweder originally

proposed that there are three distinct moral approaches reflected in the three other-condemning emotions. He called these the “Ethics of Autonomy,” the “Ethics of Community,” and the “Ethics of Divinity.” The last of these “relies on regulative concepts such as sacred order, natural order, tradition, sanctity, sin, and pollution. It aims to protect the soul, the spirit, the spiritual aspects of the human agent and ‘nature’ from degradation” (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park 1997, 138).

As we have seen, Shweder’s project has been taken in a more evolutionary-psychological direction by Haidt and his colleagues, who have seen fit to recast matters so that what was called an “ethic” has since become a “moral foundation.” When it comes to naming this ethic, “purity/sanctity” is cumbersome, and “purity ethics” lacks a handy verbal form. In this paper I will refer to this form of ethical thought as “fetish ethics,” since “fetish” has a convenient verbal form—subject S “fetishizes” x—which connotes the idea that S treats x as if it is imbued with a spiritual (positive or negative) power.⁹

We may now be a little more precise about what the “fetish ethic” is by providing a genus-species definition. Its genus is a form of ethical thought, a pattern of inferences that connects affects, intuitions, judgments, and behaviors—in short, what is sometimes called an “ethos.” Since “ethos” is not a count noun in Greek, let us dub “ethe” as its plural. With “ethe” in hand, we say that, as a matter of contingent fact, this ethos is one of a small class of ethe that is ubiquitous in the moral psychology of humans, and there are plausible stories to tell about how we evolved to think along the lines of this form of thought. Nonetheless, we do not need to commit ourselves to identifying this ethos with a mental module, or even to the controversial claim that it is part of this ethos’ nature that it is innate in humans.¹⁰ Turning to its species, the fetish ethic is that ethos whose inferences link *these* affects (such as disgust, horror, a sense of the holy, etc.) to *these* behaviors (such as washing, baptizing, purging, or incinerating) on the basis of *these* sorts of principles (e.g., the similarity and contagion principles).

As pointed out in the introduction, one does not manifest fetish-ethical reasoning merely by acknowledging certain types of values or disvalues. A consequentialist of the holy who asserts we should maximize holiness would hardly be a moral fetishist. Nor would a contractarian who urges that holiness ought to be distributed according to agreements made by ideally rational and informed agents. What marks fetish-ethical thought is both its putative values and its characteristic mode of valuing, or characteristic principles about how to respond to these sorts of values and disvalues.¹¹ Given the foregoing discussion, it is hard to resist the conclusion that one cannot detach the two concerns, since certain sorts of goods can reasonably be managed only in certain sorts of ways. To see a neutral example of how this is so, consider status—a putative good in the minds of many. Status is zero-sum, which means that one cannot make more status. Thus, “status consequentialism” would be an absurd response to this sort of value. Likewise, our sense of the holy and wholesome, the horrific and disgusting, suggests that, if there are such things, they are not apt for trading, minimizing, or maximizing; rather, we expect that someone who genuinely holds some object or property to be these things to be disposed to treat it in ways that the similarity and contagion principles model. The inverse also

holds: it would be reasonable and indeed only charitable to infer that anyone *treating* some object or property in fetishistic ways must *see* it as wholesome or holy, disgusting or horrific; that is, the valuer in question must be representing that object to herself as contagious in some morally good or bad way, or hold that emulating various features of that object can make one better or worse.

It is imperative to keep in mind that not all manifestations of fetishism will be visceral. Sometimes fetishism will be sophisticated, highly cognitive, and theory-laden. To say so is only to grant the same of fetishism as we do other forms of moral thought. For instance, it is commonly held that anger and indignation are paradigmatically moral emotions because they are appropriate emotional responses to unjustified harm (e.g., Gibbard 1990). Yet relatively intelligent people with a good sense of what constitutes unjustified harm typically make inferences about what is unjustified harm without feeling anger or outrage. To borrow an example from Michael Huemer, we don't feel any outrage whatsoever upon contemplating Nero's execution of Octavia in 62 A.D.—we are simply too distant from the event (Huemer 2005, 45). Nonetheless, we have a rough theory (no doubt mostly a tacit one) of when harms are unjustified, and judge that this execution was unjustified in light of that theory. Even if, as I think is the case, anger and outrage at particular instances of unjustified harm helped us arrive at that theory about what constitutes unjust harm, it doesn't follow that we cannot make judgments about injustice unless we were experiencing those affects. Likewise, one can make fetish-ethical judgments without feeling disgusted, horrified, or sacerdotal.

IV. FETISHISM IN ETHICAL THOUGHT: CASE STUDIES

In this section I look at a few instances of conservative and academic ethical fetishism in hopes of drawing attention to a few facts. The first is that academic ethicists will engage in fetishistic reasoning from time to time, especially in matters of deep significance to them. The second fact is that fetishistic impulses are often “sublimated” by supplying “legitimate” liberal reasons to support a fetishistic impulse. I will draw out some consequences of these observations in the following section, but for now it will suffice to get the data on the table by looking at the case studies themselves.

IV. A. “DISINGENUOUS” VS. HONEST FETISHISM IN THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT

Every spring an ostensibly secular (but nonetheless evangelical Christian) organization called “Justice for All” (henceforth, “JFA”) visits a handful of college campuses and erects massive displays filled with billboard-sized photos of aborted fetuses.¹² The shockingly graphic pictures of dismembered, bloody fetuses are juxtaposed with pictures of piled holocaust victims and lynched blacks. The message is supposed to be that fetuses represent yet another marginalized group of humans who are having their right to life violated only because they are seen, as Jews and blacks once were, as less than human. In explaining themselves, JFA representatives speak fluently about rights, the “expanding circle” (Singer 1981), and about

discrimination and unequal application of the law in the case of the “marginalized” group they represent. Their logo is an “=” sign. JFA representatives will avoid any discussion of religion or spirituality if at all possible—it takes a practiced hand at the abortion debate to get any of them to a resort to such reasons (I once had some limited success with a senior representative only after careful application of speciesist objections).¹³

Although I hesitate to speak for JFA, I conjecture that they are not fundamentally motivated by concerns about rights and marginalized groups. Although JFA members probably genuinely hold that abortion violates the liberal rights of fetuses, my guess is that they nonetheless are not animated by those sorts of rights-violations, and probably do not moralize in the language of “rights” at all. As anyone intimately familiar with the world of pro-life Christianity from the inside can testify, the language of rights, equality, and liberty is *not* the language in which the rightness or wrongness of abortion (or any other matter) is discussed. When speaking to each other, the sorts of appeals Christian pro-lifers will make against abortion concern our being created in the image of God and the holiness of the womb. These sorts of claims can be dressed-up into an elaborate structure, as we observe in this passage by author and Presbyterian pastor Peter Leithart, extracted from an essay appearing in the Catholic journal *First Things*. The passage is worth quoting at length.

One can hardly imagine a clearer affirmation of God’s care for the unborn than the simple words of the Psalm: “For Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb.” . . . The Hebrew word used by the Psalmist for “woven” (*raqam*) is a comparatively rare word in the Old Testament, employed almost exclusively in texts that describe the curtains and veils of Israel’s wilderness tabernacle. . . . Psalm 139, then, is picking up on a known thread of imagery when it compares the formation of an infant in the womb to his being “woven” like a tent curtain. In the womb, the Lord weaves the tent that the infant will “wear” until he puts it off at death. With its allusions to the *roqem* work of the tabernacle, the Psalm goes further, implying not only that God has made the infant in the womb, but also that the infant is being woven into a dwelling for God. Abortion attacks not only a creature of God but a house of God. The abortionist’s instruments pierce through the unfinished *roqem* curtains and tread on holy ground. We are talking here not only about slaughter of the innocent but about sacrilege, a direct attack on “space” claimed by God. That is the most serious offense possible. Paul’s warning hovers ominously over our nation: “If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy.” (Leithart 1999)

The inferences of magical reasoning are pretty obvious in this passage. The flesh of the fetus can be shown to be holy by its similarity to the sacred temple insofar as each is described in the same terms as being “woven.” All discussion of rights is secondary; what makes actions *really* bad—what counts as the “most serious offense *possible*” to Leithart—is sacrilege, the evil of which pales to insignificance the badness involved in killing innocent people.

The contrast between JFA on the one hand and Leithart on the other raises a complicated question of intellectual integrity. Each probably agrees on all matters

having to do with the abortion debate. JFA, however, chooses to forward *only* liberal reasons in their brief against abortion: they portray themselves as motivated by their concern for “justice for all” rather than by what we suspect are their true reasons for protesting abortion. Thus, JFA isn’t *lying*, since they believe abortion does unfairly violate human rights (we grant). Nor are they even obviously “bullshitting” us (in Harry Frankfurt’s terminology) (Frankfurt 2005), since they take seriously the truth (as they see it) that abortion is wrong. Nonetheless, there is something disquieting about JFA’s speaking in such liberal terms. Rather than lying or bullshitting, we might say that JFA is being *disingenuous* in their anti-abortion protests. They portray themselves as being moved by reasons that, at best, are ancillary to the ones they feel are central and most fundamental to the question at hand.¹⁴

IV. B. THREE ETHICISTS WHO FETISHIZED: LEON KASS, MICHAEL WALZER, AND DAVID LEWIS

JFA is perhaps a rare case. Many conservatives stand by their concern for purity—even in liberal forums. The most famous example of this is probably found in Leon Kass’s condemnation of cloning in his “The Wisdom of Repugnance.” Kass argues that liberals have somehow gained the power of minting the currency of ethical discourse (Kass 1997, 20). But the liberal approach isn’t an appropriate vantage-point from which to examine the ethical correctness of cloning, he thinks. Kass isn’t clear on what the name of his recommended perspective *is*, but it is difficult not to see it as fetishistic:

To this more fitting and profound point of view, cloning shows itself to be a major alteration, indeed, a major violation, of our given nature as embodied, gendered and engendering beings—and of the social relations built on this natural ground. Once this perspective is recognized, the ethical judgment on cloning can no longer be reduced to a matter of motives and intentions, rights and freedoms, benefits and harms, or even means and ends. It must be regarded primarily as a matter of meaning: Is cloning a fulfillment of human begetting and belonging? Or is cloning rather, as I contend, their pollution and perversion? To pollution and perversion, the fitting response can only be horror and revulsion; and conversely, generalized horror and revulsion are *prima facie* evidence of foulness and violation. The burden of moral argument must fall entirely on those who want to declare the widespread repugnances of humankind to be mere timidity or superstition. (Kass 1997, 20–21)

The fetishism in this and similar passages is manifest, both in terms of the affects appealed-to as revelatory of the disvalue in question (cloning is “horrific,” “repugnant,” “polluting,” “revolting,” “offense,” “grotesque,” and “repulsive”), as well as the magical reasoning inherent in such accusations (if cloning “fouls,” then it must be that the clonants or at least the clonant’s culture that is “contaminated” by such a process).

Examples of conservative fetishism are easy to find. There can be little doubt that “popular” conservative condemnations of homosexuality, kinky sexual practices, flag “desecration” and so forth are best explained in fetishistic terms. And if Haidt’s research is sound, then political conservatives are more likely to *admit*

that they appeal to what we are calling “fetishism.” But whether conservatives are more honest about their fetishistic ethical impulses, or are actually more prone to fetishistic reasoning than academic Westerners are, are questions worth considering. Of course, these are empirical questions, but it might be instructive to take note of a few instances of fetishistic reasoning coming from more liberal quarters, some of which strike academic philosophers very close to home.

For instance, what might be the richest vein of fetishism in academic ethics was initiated in Michael Walzer’s discussion of “dirty hands.” For Walzer, an agent could be “tainted” by doing something that he is nonetheless obligated to do, given his position. For instance, a politician might well be obligated to order the torture of a terrorist if he has good reason to suppose the terrorist will reveal, under the duress of torture, the location of some ticking time bombs scattered throughout a city. Nonetheless, even though Walzer feels the politician in this case should order the torture, he feels the politician necessarily “dirties his hands” by doing so.

[A] particular act of government . . . may be exactly the right thing to do in utilitarian terms and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong. The innocent man, afterwards, is no longer innocent. If on the other hand he remains innocent . . . he not only fails to do the right thing (in utilitarian terms), he may also fail to live up to the duties of his office (which imposes on him considerable responsibility for consequences and outcomes). (Walzer 1973, 161)

Walzer doesn’t mean the third use of “innocent” in this passage in the sense of “not guilty,” but rather in a *magical* sense wherein the innocent person is viewed as clean, pure, or virginal. Later, Walzer writes that, although the politician must dirty his hands, he can only dirty them within limits—he must not “lose his soul” by dirtying his hands too much. He must be, quite literally, redeemable:

A politician with dirty hands needs a soul, and it is best for us all if he has some hope of personal salvation, however that is conceived. It is not the case that when he does bad in order to do good he surrenders himself forever to the demon of politics. He commits a determinate crime, and he must pay a determinate penalty. When he has done so, his hands will be clean again, or as clean as human hands can ever be. (Walzer 1973, 178)

Obviously, the motif of dirty hands manifests all the usual indicators of sympathetic magic: gore and fear of animal nature (the metaphor is Sartre’s, who has a communist leader say that he has dirty hands “up to the elbow” since he has “plunged them in filth and blood” (Sartre [1944] 1989), soul-protection from moral contagion, and redemption via some “cleansing” process.

Thus, in Walzer’s “dirty hands” problem, we have *liberal non-consequentialist* disvalues (liberal rights violations) being managed according to *magical* inference-patterns (harming “pollutes” the harmer) and balanced against *liberal consequentialist* considerations (we need to prevent grave suffering even if we must pollute ourselves to do so). Perhaps Walzer could have articulated how the correct action could leave us guilty without appeal to fetishistic language and principles. But in diagnosing the operation of an ethos, metaphors matter. Purged of its fetishistic

language and logic, the essay would not have been compelling and wouldn't accurately reflect Walzer's intuitions—or our own. "Sometimes you are (or at least should feel) guilty for doing the right thing" simply wouldn't speak to the sense Walzer (or we) have that politicians are forced to do things that a good person would feel sullied by.¹⁵

Other characteristic concerns of liberalism are equally apt to be fetishized by academic philosophers. In a posthumously-published essay on God and evil (based on notes), David Lewis wonders how we should evaluate those who love God, given that God is supposed by such people to have created a place of eternal torment for those who disobey him. Lewis compares the Christian to Fritz, a Nazi. Fritz, although personally harmless, is evil given that (a) he feels it is *Hitler's* job to prosecute the holocaust and (b) he cheers on Hitler's efforts. To Lewis, "Fritz is evil, it seems, simply because it is evil to admire someone evil . . . in full recognition of the characteristics and actions that express his evil; . . . [e]vil is contagious, transmitted by clear-eyed admiration" (Lewis 2007, 239). Because of this inference-pattern, otherwise laudable Christians are "tainted" by the evil of the God they admire, since they believe God sends people to hell and that it is his prerogative to do so. What is worse, we who admire supposedly admirable Christians (such as Mother Teresa) risk being tainted by *their* evil.

In admiring [Christians], we too admire evil. Does the evil spread by contagion to us? What of those who admire those who admire those who worship the perpetrator? Are they too infected? If admiration transmits evil, then . . . [e]ventually almost every living person will be infected. . . . The more we are prepared to be tolerant in religious matters, the more the contagion will spread. The only ones to escape will be the misanthropes. Leaving aside those who find nothing admirable in humanity, everyone will be tainted with divine evil. (Lewis 2007, 239)

Lewis avoids concluding that we are all "infected" by divine evil only by recourse to the fact that we admire some, but not all aspects of another's character. Thus, the "chain of contagion" is broken and some can avoid being "tainted" by the believers (Lewis 2007, 240).

The fetishistic reasoning here is stark. After all, a more standard strategy for accounting for Fritz's evil is easy enough to construct: try to show that Fritz is morally reprehensible (not so much "evil") because he has culpably allowed himself to have such seriously *wrong* moral beliefs and/or sentiments, then go on to say that an admirer of Fritz might be blameworthy for the same reason Fritz is. Such an account doesn't need to justify our moral condemnation by appeal to some sort of mysterious moral contagion. Since there can be no doubt that Lewis was aware of this strategy, he must have deliberately rejected it in order to portray "divine evil" in fetish-ethical terms. Why? Well, perhaps Lewis's intent was to exploit the rhetorical power of fetish-ethical language, which grips us on a much more fundamental level than the comparatively thin-blooded appeal to our moral—or would it be epistemic?—duty to have correct moral beliefs. But that would border on disingenuity. Perhaps Lewis was spoofing a common form of spiritual reasoning in his own critique of religion? Maybe. I suspect, however, that Lewis employed

fetish-ethical reasoning chiefly because he wanted to represent accurately the way *he* felt the evil under discussion actually accrues to one who admires evil people. If so, then since the received ethical rationale would mask the real nature of this dynamic, Lewis couldn't in good conscience use it.

IV. C. "SUBLIMATING" FETISHISM: HAUSKELLER ON CHICKIENOBBS

It would be too crude to contrast the "honest" ethicists and moralists (e.g., Leithart, Kass, Walzer, Lewis), who on occasion wear their fetishism on their sleeve, against the "disingenuous" ones who quite consciously disguise their fetishistic reasoning under a mask of liberalism (as I suspect JFA does). Some philosophers "sublimate" their fetishistic impulses into liberal terms. The sublimating ethicist is so-called not only because she *replaces* her fetishistic reasons with liberal ones, but also because she *repudiates* (on some level) the fetishistic ones. Just as one might sublimate one's (bad) anger into (positive) physical exertion, the sublimator seeks to sublimate her (primitive, irrational) fetishism into (sound, legitimate) liberalism.

Sublimating can be done consciously or unconsciously. For a particularly dramatic instance of conscious, deliberate sublimation, one could hardly do better than point to Michael Hauskeller's discussion of ChickieNobs (Hauskeller 2006). In his nuanced defense of disgust as a moral emotion, Hauskeller demonstrates his familiarity with the research on disgust summarized above. Hauskeller doesn't believe that disgust or horror reveal objective properties of *disgustingness* or *horribleness*, however, because he thinks that the targets of these affects are too variable from culture to culture. Nonetheless, he feels that on occasion disgust or horror can be underwritten with genuinely "moral" reasons. Like Haidt's paradigm liberal, Hauskeller is persuaded that genuinely moral reasons are grounded in appeals to harm (Hauskeller 2006, 594–596).

Hauskeller then subjects this (liberal) ethical commitment to a trial by fire. As he notes, an increasing number of Westerners today seem to be disgusted by meat-eating (as Hauskeller himself is) and horrified at the prospect of eating or even creating transgenic plants and animals. Enter ChickieNobs, a fictional food product featured in Margret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*. ChickieNobs are developed by a biotechnology laboratory seeking a profitable and painless source of chicken-meat, and at one point in the novel the narrator is given a tour of the lab growing this foodstuff:

What they were looking at was a large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing. "What the hell is it?" said Jimmy. "Those are chickens," said Crake. "Chicken parts. Just the breasts." . . . "But there aren't any heads," said Jimmy. "That's the head in the middle," said the woman. "There's a mouth-opening at the top, and they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything, they don't need those." . . . "And the animal-welfare freaks won't be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain." (Atwood 2003, 202–203; quoted in Hauskeller 2006, 593–594)

On the one hand, Hauskeller feels a strong, persistent moral disgust at the prospect of ChickieNobs. On the other hand, his ethical commitments force him to countenance ChickieNobs morally unless he can show some “specific harm” would be done by their manufacture. Hauskeller’s strategy for reconciling his moral disgust to his liberal morality involves, surprisingly, an appeal to Joel Feinberg’s considerations about harming future generations (Feinberg 1984). As one might imagine, connecting ChickieNobs to our obligations to future generations takes some saying (about three pages worth), but Hauskeller sums up his case this way:

We can return to the Atwood case now. . . . Although the ChickieNobs could not have existed other than they are and their interests have, strictly speaking, not been thwarted, it is plausible to assume that they have been wronged by being brought into existence in such a state. The life they have (if it is a life) is certainly not worth living, and any rational being would prefer not to exist than to exist in this state. That is why creating such beings cannot be dismissed as morally unproblematic. (Hauskeller 2006, 599)

Suppose Hauskeller’s argument is sound. Nonetheless, I think the reader—and perhaps Hauskeller himself—would grant that it is highly unlikely that these complicated considerations about harming future generations *cause* the horror we feel at the prospect of ChickieNobs. ChickieNobs are precisely the sort of thing the fetish ethic, with its sensitivity to “strange flesh,”¹⁶ would dispose us to be repulsed by. It is particularly easy to see ChickieNobs as “perversions” of nature and thus disgusting and horrific. In comparison, the harm-based rationale for condemning ChickieNobs requires a bend-over-backward effort even to articulate, let alone defend. Undertaking this effort sets Hauskeller apart from Kass, Lewis, and Walzer, who defended their views in fetishistic terms. And yet unlike JFA, Hauskeller doesn’t endorse his fetishism but disguise it behind a liberal-ethical façade. Rather, Hauskeller is openly sublimating or redirecting his fetishistic reactions into (what he takes to be) more legitimate liberal moral objections to ChickieNobs. And although I will argue in the next section that sublimated arguments should be viewed with skepticism, the practice obviously isn’t intellectually dishonest.

V. FETISHISM: TRACE IT, FACE IT, ERASE IT—OR EMBRACE IT?

If Rozin, Shweder, and Haidt and their colleagues are correct, we are innately prone to fetishize, and this propensity can be traced to our species’ disgust reactions to meat, infectious diseases, and other mundane dangers. We have seen above that we must face the fetishism displayed by moralists and academics. But a disciplined mind can expunge even an innate propensity. So three options present themselves: to reject these intuitions, to sublimate them into liberal terms, or to accept them and try to accommodate them into our moral theorizing. I argue in this final section that sublimating is usually a mistake, and that repudiating fetishism isn’t obviously justified.

V. A. AGAINST SUBLIMATING FETISHISM INTO LIBERALISM

Consider the sublimating option first. Recall from the previous section that “sublimating” one’s fetishism is distinct from being “disingenuous” about it. Disingenuity masks the fetishistic reasons behind liberal ones, whereas the sublimating ethicist sincerely tries to justify her fetishistic condemnation with liberal reasons, since she repudiates (consciously or not) her fetishism. One is *not* sublimating one’s fetishism if one has strong, pre-theoretical liberal intuitions that urge the same pre- or pro-cription and chooses merely to articulate the liberal case. Sublimation necessarily involves “supplying” in some way liberal justifications for fetishistic intuitions.

One consideration against sublimation is that the supplied liberal arguments will usually be “post hoc”—sublimators are typically inventing phony reasons in support of a conclusion they already accept rather than discovering genuine ones. After all, there is little reason to believe (and significant reason to doubt) that there is much overlap of the (in fact) disgusting/horrific/sacrilegious and the (in fact) unjustly harmful, just as there is no reason to expect squishy things to have some particular color. Of course, overlap is bound to occur sometimes: it *may* be that creating ChickieNobs would not only be horrible but also unjustly harmful. But prescinding from this case, the best explanation for liberal condemnations of practices the critic finds disgusting or horrific is that the critic is (intentionally or unintentionally) inventing reasons to defend her fetishistic intuitions. This is especially the case if the liberal justification is *elaborate* as opposed to *straightforward*, if the target of criticism is a *paradigm elicitor* of fetishistic condemnation but not of liberal condemnation, and if the gravity of liberal offense would be *low* while the gravity of fetish-ethical offense would be *high*. The tendentious legal case made by conservatives against same-sex marriage instantiate all three of these markers: homosexuals are paradigm targets of disgust in the relevant subculture; the legal justification for the ban on same-sex marriage is complex; and putative injustice to religious groups if same-sex marriage were legalized is nowhere near proportional to the vigor with which conservatives have resisted it. Thus, although a sublimated argument may be sound, ethicists should view such arguments with extra suspicion. Call this the “moral-epistemic” objection to sublimation.

This objection based on the sublimator’s “post hoc” justifications doesn’t generalize to a general condemnation of intuition-mongering, a practice I cautiously endorse (Demetriou 2009). Often we have an intuition about a particular case, find ourselves unable at first to justify the intuition, but after honest and careful reflection uncover the principle whose tacit acceptance plausibly helped generate the intuition. Upon uncovering this principle, we often reject it as self-serving, racist, sexist, or the product of indoctrination. But sometimes we endorse it. In that case, the principle doesn’t only help *explain* the intuition, but it is also usually forwarded as the *justification* for (the content of) the intuition. If this form of intuition-mongering is “post-hoc,” then it seems some post-hoc reasoning is epistemically virtuous. Indeed, Haidt himself argues that his MFT model not only explains vast swaths of our moral intuitions, but represents them as more systematic, rule-governed, and in a sense “reasonable” than the phony, artificial, and lawyerly sort of post-hoc justifications his moral dumbfounding research helped expose. (In

the eyes of many, he sees them as *too* reasonable: his sympathy for these non-liberal forms of thought has scandalized him to some degree among liberal academics [Parry 2012].) Like Haidt, I am suggesting that the fundamental sources of non-liberal intuitions might well represent the facts more accurately than the liberal rationales we invent for them.

A second concern about sublimation may be termed the “moral remainder” worry. It is best to explain this objection by appeal to an example. Take Hauskeller’s liberal argument against ChickieNobs again. His unjust harm-based objection to ChickieNobs, *if* sound, concludes only that it would be unjustly harmful to develop ChickieNobs. The injustice of developing ChickieNobs doesn’t justify being morally disgusted by them, since *x*’s being unjustly developed doesn’t at all entail *x* is the proper object of moralized disgust. (Is the Hermitage the proper object of moralized disgust for having been constructed by serfs?) Concluding that ChickieNobs would be unjust to grow wouldn’t even entail that we shouldn’t eat any that happen to be around with great relish. (Eating them may be a useful way of way of disposing of them after we outlaw them.) Moralized disgust, then, is the “remainder” left unjustified by Hauskeller’s liberal argument.

Now unjustified moral disgust poses no problem for the liberal prepared to repudiate her fetishism fully. But the sublimator is trying in some way to preserve the appearances of her fetishism. This is why, after all, she works so hard to defend her fetish-ethical intuitions with liberal rationales. And this aim is what gets the sublimator into trouble. For instance, Hauskeller thinks his harm-based argument shows that because it would be unjust to create them, ChickieNobs are “morally problematic,” and thus that the *moral disgust* we feel towards them is justified (Hauskeller 2006, 596, 599). If *that* is the conclusion of his argument, then the argument is invalid. Perhaps everything justifiably morally disgusting is wrong, but not everything wrong—and a fortiori not everything merely unjustly harmful—is justifiably morally disgusting.

Of course, if a sublimator is careful, she can caution her readers against fetishizing the objects of her liberal condemnation. She might stress that her argument only shows we shouldn’t do *x*, but not that we should be *repelled* by *x* or the types of people who do *x*. However, the standard practice is far less disciplined: usually, we find a fetishistic intuition against *x* given some liberal justification, then, once *x* is “legitimately” condemned, the sublimator and her audience falsely imagine themselves justified in condemning *x* in *fetishistic* ways. And indeed it would be somewhat incredible for a clear-eyed sublimator even to *try* to show that some action was “wrong” for liberal reasons if she knew from the outset that the victory would be pyrrhic in this way, leaving as an unaccounted-for “remainder” the intuition that spurred her to cast about for a liberal rationale in the first place.

So in general, the “moral remainder” worry can be stated as a dilemma: either the sublimated rationale concludes with a claim that justifies the fetish-ethical appearances the sublimator sought to preserve through her liberal rationale, or it does not. If it does *not*, the sublimation (as such) failed, and we at best have a tendentious liberal argument that (for reasons raised by the “moral-epistemic” objection) we should view with considerable skepticism. If on the other hand the sublimator’s

conclusion *does* provide a justification for the fetish-ethical appearances, her argument must be either tacitly fetish-ethical or (if truly liberal) unsound.

V. B. EMBRACING YOUR INNER FETISHIST

If I am correct in arguing that sublimating fetishistic intuitions with liberal ethical philosophizing yields particularly suspect arguments, we are left with two remaining options: either “erasing” or “embracing” our fetishism. The only possible reason for embracing an ethos is its (undefeated) intuitiveness. Let’s begin, then, by contemplating the raw intuitiveness of the fetish ethic, and then turn to whether its intuitiveness should be seen as defeated.

We have already seen how some liberal academics adverted to fetish-ethical reasoning. In fact, examples of liberal, academic, or at least non-politically-conservative fetishism can be multiplied. Many arguments against using Nazi medical research rely heavily upon the idea that we “taint” our scientific and medical research by relying on knowledge gleaned from such horrific experiments as, say, the Mengele twin or hypothermia studies.¹⁷ Some academics and many left-leaning feminists endorse efforts—often successful—to reclaim racist, sexist, or homophobic terms. These efforts can be seen as the attempt to redeem, through laudatory use, various words that have been sullied by their hateful application. (Of course, not just anyone can morally cleanse these terms: only a person with impeccable credentials on these issues—a sort of high priest or priestess of the oppressed or marginalized group—can transvalue hate speech.)¹⁸ The reverse dynamic also holds: we also “renounce” some non-hateful speech for fetishistic reasons. Although “niggardly” has a non-racist etymology, one is unlikely to hear it used today, since it resembles a pejorative so taboo even academics aware of the use/mention distinction refuse to utter the “n-word.”

Suffice it to say that, with a little honesty and reflection, one will be able to find some fetishism lurking about in one’s ethical thought. For instance, I find this case (modified from a cross-cultural experimental probe having to do with cleaning toilets with flags) (Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993) to be quite successful at revealing the latent fetishism in my philosophical colleagues.

T-shirt: Today Amy wore a touristy t-shirt given to her by a cherished friend (recently deceased) to commemorate a trip through Europe they made together in college. Upon returning home from work, Amy realizes her toilet needs some cleaning. She knows that nothing on the toilet will stain her t-shirt, and furthermore that it would be best for the environment to clean the toilet with the t-shirt rather than a fresh rag (since she is about to throw the shirt in the laundry basket anyway). Would it be morally wrong for Amy to use the shirt to clean the toilet?

Most philosophers I confront with this case admit to seeing something morally problematic with what Amy does. We can appeal to liberal reasons for our moral condemnation, of course: perhaps we can ferret out some sort of promise Amy has tacitly made in accepting the shirt to the effect that she wouldn’t use it in such a way. But we know enough at this point to see how hollow such explanations ring. After

all, why should Amy's gift carry a tacit agreement that it be treated with "respect" if it weren't for the fact that one can "disrespect" the gift by cleaning a toilet with it? And in any case, why should "respecting" gifts matter if it weren't for the fact that by "disrespecting" a gift one "disrespects" the friendship by treating its symbol (i.e., the totem of the friendship) in a disrespectful way?

Turning to grave evils, consider how, as noted earlier, Rozin and others have observed that particularly wanton murders (and murderers) elicit disgust and horror. Perhaps this non-fictional case will serve as an example.

Rape: In the summer of 2007, a young man knocked on a West Palm Beach mother's door, asking for help with a flat tire. The woman left her house to help him, but was promptly "ambushed" by a group of masked young men and forced back into her house. Once there, at least two teenagers "raped, sodomized and beat the woman, then forced her 12-year-old son to participate in the assault at gunpoint, making him have sex with his mother in front of them. The boy was then beaten and had numerous household cleaning liquids poured into his eyes, according to the police report." (AP July 6, 2007)

Even when described in the dispassionate, colorless prose of an AP article, the case generates a certain horror.¹⁹ Given our discussion, we can now see why various features of this case conspire to elicit fetishistic responses. The first is that there is an element of "unnaturalness" to the crime. Rape is of course deeply wrong but (depending on the age of the victim) isn't, as it were, "unnatural." On the other hand, forcing mothers to have sex with their sons is. Assaulting is often "natural" even if wrong (say, assaulting someone who offended you in some way). Torturing—for no other purpose than pleasure—a boy already in your control by pouring cleaning liquids in his eyes is, on the other hand, perverse. Above the unnaturalness of the crime, we also are horrified by the extraordinary disrespect displayed by the rapists. Not only do they exploit something as valuable as a person for unwarranted purposes, they also seek to demean their victims. Using people only as a means is one thing; degrading them for no other purpose is quite another. For those of us who see personhood as somehow at the pinnacle of existence (a humanistic, enlightenment, and liberal tendency if ever there was one), the disrespect shown to those victims elicits what can only be called a sense of sacrilege. In fact, given the emerging picture, it should now be clear that many of our pet cases of grave moral wrongdoing—torturing babies for fun, catching tossed babies on bayonets, sewing lampshades out of the skin of holocaust victims—to a large degree pump not our liberal moral intuitions, but our *fetishistic* ones.

V. C. REPUDIATIONIST ARGUMENTS CONSIDERED

So fetishism has been—and remains—an extremely intuitive component of moral reasoning. I have already argued we shouldn't sublimate it. So if we must reject it, we must rid our moral reasoning of fetishism root and branch. Are the arguments for such a drastic measure compelling? I don't think so.

Some objections against the fetish ethic are metaethical and some are ethical. The first metaethical objection argues that, given the emerging story about fetishism's

ontogeny, the only reasonable conclusion is to see this ethic as “debunked.” The critic points to the fact that the contagion and similarity platitudes were formed by selection pressures. Since we have no reason to believe that selection pressures should result in an ability to track moral value, we have no reason to trust these sentiments or the inference-patterns they brought with them when they were drafted by our ancestors for purposes of moral appraisal (Kelly 2011).

In reply, it is worth pointing out that not everyone who believes in moral facts holds that moral facts are mind-independent: a good number of philosophers see ethical facts as being fixed in part by our judgments or sentiments in some sort of idealized circumstance (e.g., Smith 1994). Given the power of fetishistic impulses, one might plausibly think that our ideal responses would retain some of their fetishistic character: the ideal valuer (selected by whatever process makes such valuers ideal) might well moralize in fetishistic ways on occasion. If so, then some fetishistic moral reasoning is legitimate.

But even for those of us who hold that moral facts are mind-independent in a fairly robust way, the natural history of the fetish ethic in humans shouldn't raise *special* worries. Fairly worked-out and plausible evolutionary accounts for our harm-reducing and justice-based intuitions are on offer as well, we must remember,²⁰ and arguments for *global* moral skepticism based upon the evolutionary origins of our moral capacities are well-known (e.g., Joyce 2006; Street 2006). Thus, moral realists must soldier on with the hope that, somehow, these modules and their concomitant intuitions about what is valuable and disvaluable (and how best to respond to these (dis)values), designed as they were by fitness pressures, serve as genuine preadaptations useful for discovering moral truth—just as we hope our logical, mathematical, and perceptual capacities do.

The metaethical critic might reply that we *do* have more reason to doubt our fetish ethical intuitions than our liberal-ethical ones. We know that the inference-patterns of magical reasoning are false in the *natural* order, so we have good reason to suppose they are invalid in the moral order as well. I would point out in reply that, although it is certainly true that the inference-patterns of magical reasoning are false when describing the descriptive facts, this observation shouldn't besmirch their validity when it comes to the moral facts (or some sub-domain of such facts). Recall that, according to the natural history of disgust outlined above, the contagion and similarity platitudes of magical reasoning are fundamentally normative ones that were projected onto the natural order, not the other way around. On this story, the disgust response and the principles of magical reasoning were, so to speak, inscribed on our ancestors' brains in order to allow them to respond in advantageous ways to the *badness* (for them) of fecal matter and diseased flesh. Eventually, early humans employed these normative concepts to norm their behavior and to explain the natural order. As anthropological and experimental research shows, these inference-patterns are still being projected onto the natural world, and this is indeed irrational—making thunder-noises doesn't make rain. But this projection of fetishistic rules onto the natural order shouldn't undermine our credence in those inferences' validity in the moral realm. After all, some justice-minded people seem to believe that “history” operates in a fundamentally just way. For instance, one

often hears high-sounding assurances that “history will judge” or that “history will vindicate” so-and-so, and a sort of secular catechism teaches that “the wheels of justice grind slow, but fine.” Karma, too, might be understood as a quasi-natural law that enforces justice. I take it as obvious that this is all hokum. But should this undermine justice-based ethics? Of course not—it would be ridiculous to criticize that ethical approach on the grounds that some people superimpose principles of justice (that the unjust must be punished, that the just must be rewarded) onto the natural order. The same courtesy must be shown to the fetish ethicist.

The final metaethical objection is that old workhorse, the argument from disagreement: people disagree strongly over what is holy/perverse, how to redeem and purge evil items, and how properly to become sanctified. People disagree so vigorously about these matters, presumably, because they are disgusted, horrified, and spiritually elevated by all sorts of different things. So these intuitions don't track anything at all, let alone something of ethical significance (Kekes 1992). Martha Nussbaum raises this sort of objection in her *Hiding from Humanity*, where at one point she poses a dilemma for (what we are calling) fetishistic-minded ethicists (such as Kass):

Either he [Kass] will say that in all these cases [of former disgust toward homosexuality, miscegenation, etc.], disgust gave and gives good guidance, in which case he will strike most readers as making a preposterous and heinous assertion; or he will say that in some of them disgust actually gave bad guidance, in which case he needs a criterion to distinguish good from bad cases of disgust. (Nussbaum 2004, 82)²¹

Nussbaum doesn't see disgust as grounding a standalone “ethos” as I do. And her goal is to say that the disgustingness of an action shouldn't be legally relevant—a position I am inclined to agree with. Nonetheless, the dilemma matters for our purposes. How shall we answer it?

I think we must first note that there is no reason to think that humankind has been more univocal in its opinions about the *just* and *unjust* than they have been in their appraisals of the *holy* and the *horrific*. Medieval theologians felt it was perfectly just for God to send sinners to eternal torment for practices we would find trivial today, if not outright permissible. White slaveholders felt it would be unjust to give escaped slaves sanctuary in the North, since slaves were the property of the slaveholders. Today, libertarians decry the injustice of forced wealth-redistribution while advocates of “global justice” and “occupy” movements argue that such redistribution is demanded by justice. Most major debates in our liberal democracies evidence our perplexity over what is just and unjust. What lesson shall we take from these facts? Shall we say that the liberal ethicist is caught in a parallel dilemma, in which she must either acknowledge that all our justice-based intuitions are correct (including those of the slaveholder), or else give a quasi-objective “criterion” of justice?

Nussbaum seems to accept the second horn on behalf of liberalism: anger (the liberal other-condemnatory emotion) can also be misguided, she admits, but anger “at least makes a claim that is a pertinent one . . . [that] this is a very serious harm, wrongfully inflicted” (Nussbaum 2004, 122). To the fetish ethicist, of course, this

moral “criterion” is circular on its face. Of course “harm” that is “wrongly” (or shall we say “unjustly”?) inflicted will serve as the criterion for the correctness of liberal evaluations, since that is precisely what anger (and the liberal self-condemnatory emotion, guilt) track, however poorly. So to say that this liberal criterion is the only morally “pertinent” one is to beg the question against the fetish ethicist.

Of course, the fetish ethicist can offer her own criterion for moral disgust and horror:

CRITERION: A fetishistic condemnation of some action A (a moralized disgust/horror reaction toward A) is justified if and only if A was sacrilegious or degrades something holy.

Does CRITERION come too cheaply for the defender of moral disgust and horror? Well, it comes about as cheaply as Nussbaum’s appeal to unjust harm as the criterion for justified anger and guilt. *Justice* can be seen as a property we have had to postulate in order to justify certain strong emotions/intuitions (anger, outrage, guilt, and a sense of duty). Some might see justice as a projection or fictional property that facilitates thinking about real properties (as an evolutionary biologist might think of the property *being designed by nature*). Some might see it as a response-dependent property, somewhat akin to *being cool*. Realists about justice might see it in terms of a mind-independent property necessary to explain our emotional appearances (just as we postulate electrons to explain the appearances revealed in physics experiments). In similar ways, the fetish ethicist can forward a property, *holiness* or *sanctity*, perhaps—although it can be referred to by any term you like—to make sense of her fetishistic emotions (disgust, horror, feeling holy or sanctified, etc.), and yet maintain a studied metaethical agnosticism with respect to the ontological status of that property.

These arguments are all negative. But more positively, Alexandra Plakias in her own recent defense of disgust-based ethics has pointed to empirical findings that some goods and evils (e.g., happiness, poor health habits, racist attitudes) spread like contagions. Sometimes a rotten apple does spoil the barrel, and sometimes good habits do rub off. It thus would appear that what we are calling the fetish ethic is well-suited to regulating (positive and negative) social contagion (Plakias, forthcoming). If liberalism—with its focus on individuals and individual responsibility—cannot cope with these facts of social contagion in intuitive ways, then it seems the fetish ethic indeed represents a slice of moral reality, whatever its history and original targets of evaluation.

So much for the metaethical objections to fetishism. The first moral objection to fetish ethics is that it is illiberal. As we saw with the Walzer and Lewis case-studies, it really doesn’t matter *what* we actually value; if we value *x* in a fetishistic way we ipso facto value *x* according to the platitudes of magical reasoning. By fetishizing *x* we necessarily see *x* as holy (if we value it) or as sinisterly evil (if we devalue it), and this fact has behavioral and sentimental consequences that cannot be reconciled with liberal sorts of responses. Crimes we are horrified or disgusted by, for instance, prompt us to treat offenders differently from those we consider outrageous. Nussbaum makes this point when she argues against drafting fetishistic

emotions (such as disgust) to the cause of liberalism (e.g., by using them eradicate racism or sexism). In part this is because disgust, due to

its core idea of contamination, basically wants to get the person out of sight. And it seems to me that we should not have that attitude toward racists and sexists. We should distinguish carefully between the persons and their acts, blame people for any bad or harmful acts they commit, but retain a respect for them as persons, capable of growth and change. So I think that the response that says, "Let's get those disgusting rats out of here" is not a helpful one for a liberal society, even when directed at people who may have bad motives or intentions. (Nussbaum 2004, 106)

As Nussbaum rightly sees it, the fetishistic emotions and responses natural to fetishistic appraisals are fundamentally at cross-purposes with liberal ideals.²²

Obviously, circularity will loom whenever we evaluate moral objections to an ethos, since those very objections take the stance of another ethos. Even in our own psychology, we can move back and forth between these two perspectives in the same way we can decide to see the duck or the rabbit in the duck/rabbit gestalt illusion, but never both at the same time. Nonetheless, it isn't helpful to exaggerate the oddity of fetish ethics on this question. Many of us feel that the value of a person *cannot* be clearly separated from the value of her actions or role. Virtue-ethical philosophers, for instance, seem intent on collapsing this distinction, some going so far as to suggest that the moral status of an action is wholly fixed by the character of the person performing it.²³ It is a short step from here to suggesting that the moral value of a person herself is relative to her character, which is just to say that some of us are more valuable than others, full stop, and indeed this is the conclusion most ancient virtue-ethicists arrived at.²⁴ (Even Nussbaum admits that equal humanity is a "myth" [Nussbaum 2004, 17].) But what perhaps particularly troubles the liberal about fetishism is that, unlike the virtue-ethicist, the fetish ethicist is more likely to condemn fetishistically some people for reasons completely independent of the moral quality of their actions *or* of their character. As Nussbaum repeatedly points out, people of different races, the poor, and groups who particularly remind us of our animal nature (menstruating women, the deformed and handicapped) are often the object of disgust and become a screen of sorts on which the power elite can project their own failings and thus hide from their own humanity.

While granting the accuracy of Nussbaum's accusation, we must also note that it is as much historical as it is ethical in its content. Fetish ethics' moral critics must bear in mind that this ethos hasn't benefited from the sophisticating measures of philosophical theorizing. Few-to-no justice-oriented ethicists today would accept all the things urged in the name of justice a thousand years ago. Take retributive justice: in many cultures throughout history, minor crimes were thought to be suitably punished by amputating limbs, beheading, or hanging. In fact, a variety of cultures (the Chinese, Persians, Romans, and Swiss have been cited) found it intuitive to saw offenders in half, sometimes sideways and sometimes length-wise (with head-first and crotch-first variants) (Abbott 2005, 224–225). Few of us today find sawing to be a fitting punishment for any sort of offense. Although like most

thinking people I am not particularly happy with our contemporary punishment practices, I am glad that I live in a culture that has sophisticated my justice sensibilities such that sawing punishments are unintuitive to me. I am grateful for centuries of philosophical and legal thinking that have given us nuanced notions such as proportionality, intent, and mitigating circumstance. I am glad that our justice system has been moderated by the care-based sensibility fostered by various groups—among them Christian reformers, utilitarians, and feminists—who advocated for mercy, the intrinsic value of humanity, and the intrinsic disvalue of suffering. Our conception of retributive justice very well might have been sharpened by these groups, even if these groups don't represent the justice perspective and even if the outlooks they favor turn out to be wrong.

Justice-oriented ethicists are far more aware today of the strengths and weakness of justice-theory than they were hundreds of years ago. They have formulated better responses to their theoretical opponents and have adopted various technologies to nuance and strengthen their theoretical position. By comparison to justice-theory, fetishism isn't so much in the dark ages as it is in a *prehistoric* state. No Western philosopher, as far as I'm aware, has explicitly undertaken to articulate and defend ethical fetishism outright.²⁵ But it strikes me as highly doubtful that any creative, resourceful, and ethically sensitive fetish ethicist would, after subjecting fetishism to the rigors of thought-experiments and intuition-pumps, urge us to arm ourselves with pitchforks and drive the humpback women from our village. And even in imagining the "fetish ethicist" we imagine something fairly extreme: an ethical monist who holds that fetish-ethical reasons are the only legitimate ones. Fetishism becomes more plausible yet if we imagine future ethical pluralists—call them "fetish theorists"—who weigh fetish-ethical reasons alongside of other sorts of considerations we are presently more used to discussing.

VI. CONCLUSION

An ethos doesn't need to be plausible to you in order for it count as an "ethic," as opposed to some bizarre form of practical reasoning. Plenty of ethicists think other ethicists are crazy. Nonetheless, we teach some of those "crazy" views because so many *other* people find them to be plausible. The empirical evidence suggests that the moral reasoning I call "fetishistic" is ubiquitous outside of academic circles, and I have tried to show it is compelling even to prominent philosophers from time to time. Furthermore, for an ethos to be plausible, it doesn't need to be plausible *in all cases*. Few ethicists think that their respective theories prescribe the intuitive answers in all cases. What justifies an ethical approach is that it seems to get things right in a goodish percentage of ethically-salient cases. Drawing upon empirical and philosophical considerations, I sought to show that much the same can be said for the fetish ethos. Of course, repudiating this ethic's principles and putative values remains a very live possibility. But for that rejection to be reasonable, it must be based on better objections than those canvassed here, and take aim at the best imaginable version of this ethical mode.²⁶

ENDNOTES

1. I say more about how we might understand an “ethic” or “foundation” at the end of section III.
2. For earlier models (with fewer modules) see Haidt and Joseph 2004; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, and Haidt 1999.
3. Haidt and Joseph 2007 say that their view isn’t committed to seeing these primitives as modules, but they find the modular picture most useful. I talk of “modules” for convenience.
4. See Haidt and Hersh 2001; Haidt and Graham 2007, for references.
5. For a more elaborate account, see Kelly 2011. What I have to say about the fetish ethic holds just as well if Kelly’s account of disgust’s origins of the purity ethic is true.
6. Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000 list nine elicitors of disgust, of which these are some.
7. See Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000, 641–642, for their summary of animal-nature disgust and numerous citations of the literature on that subject.
8. We are also disgusted by the merely *unlucky*: articles worn by handicapped people rate as somewhat more disgusting than those used by random people and somewhat less disgusting than those worn by healthy homosexuals, according to the same study.
9. “The word *fetish* is derived through the Portuguese *feitiço* from the Latin *factitius* (*facere*, to do, or to make), signifying made by art, artificial” (Driscoll 1913). For many languages, the word for magic is etymologically descended from the verb “to do” or “to make,” a fact that also recommends the term “fetishism” (on this point see Mauss [1902] 1972, 23–24).
10. Although I do not pursue the thought here, I think it is inadvisable to think of an ethos so-described as a natural kind. I am persuaded by considerations raised in Horgan and Timmons’s “Moral Twin Earth” thought-experiment (inter alia, their 1991) that, say, an alien race with a very different evolutionary history and cognitive architecture could very well instantiate the same, as opposed to a lookalike, ethos. So the account of the fetish ethic I offer here is essentially a “denaturalized” version of Haidt et al.’s “purity/sanctity.”
11. Fetishism, and indeed any form of ethical thought Haidt and his colleagues have in mind, is thus best understood as a way of thinking of the “right,” and not just the “good.”
12. A JFA representative informed me that that JFA is chiefly funded by the evangelical non-profit organization Focus on the Family, although this information doesn’t seem to be provided on their website (jfaweb.org/).
13. When I finally got the lead JFA representative on site to grasp the speciesist objection to condemning abortion while condoning animal killing (which he did), he adverted to what he called “a fundamental belief issue.” That a human life was more valuable than an animal life, even when of equal capacity, was grounded on his “fundamental belief” that human life was more valuable. Note that even here we find a tactical refusal to admit the source of this “fundamental belief.”
14. As I said above, I hesitate to speak for JFA—they might be portraying their actual pro-life rationale through their liberal presentation. Furthermore, they might not be “portraying” themselves at all (it is hard to say what it takes to “portray” oneself as moved by certain reasons). Readers feeling JFA is not portraying themselves as moved by any sorts of reasons whatsoever are welcome to imagine their own case of “disingenuity” as we mean it: portraying oneself as moved by reasons reflective of one ethos, while in fact being moved by reasons reflective of another.

15. This sense may be inaccurate, since fetish-ethical intuitions may be systematically misleading, as I discuss in section V.
16. In *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Caesar says to Anthony that “On the Alps/It is reported thou didst eat strange flesh,/Which some did die to look on.”
17. In one of the most sensitive essays on this topic, ethicist Benjamin Freedman (1992, 417) takes seriously the question of whether the “evil of that time infuses, insufflates, the data” and whether “we who use [the data] are tainted, rendered unclean, by this contact.”
18. E.g., there is a feminist magazine, *Bitch*; and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (1999) apparently does in fact praise “bitches”—but in ways few men could get away with.
19. At the site (usatoday.com) where I accessed this article, someone calling herself “Akesha77” wrote in response: “First of all, I literally felt like throwing up when I read this. I have no sympathy nor empathy for the monsters who violated this woman and her child. I pray that the mother and son get some good counseling from the county and their church. Because only with God’s help can someone overcome something so horrific.”
20. Joyce 2006 provides a helpful summary of the case for this; cf. of course the work by Haidt et al. op cit. for their own views about the ontogeny of the various moral foundations.
21. See also Harris 2004, 53–57 for a similar thought.
22. In essence, this is the moral remainder objection against sublimation, used for different purposes.
23. E.g., Slote 1997, 206 calls his “agent-based” ethic one which derives “its evaluations of human actions, whether aretaic or deontic, from independent and fundamental aretaic characterizations of the inner traits or motives of individuals or the individuals themselves.”
24. E.g., Plato’s myth of the metals (*Republic* 414d–417b) and Aristotle’s thoughts on “natural slaves” (*Politics* I 4–8).
25. But again, see Plakias (forthcoming) for a limited defense.
26. Thanks to Graham Oddie, Richard Shweder, Ajume Wingo, and two blind referees for suggesting important improvements to earlier drafts of this essay.

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