

## 5. THE SANCTITY/DEGRADATION FOUNDATION

In early 2001, Armin Meiwes, a German computer technician, posted an unusual advertisement on the Web: "Looking for a well-built 21-to-30-year-old to be slaughtered and then consumed." Hundreds of men responded by email, and Meiwes interviewed a few of them at his farmhouse. Bernd Brandes, a forty-three-year-old computer engineer, was the first respondent who didn't change his mind when he realized that Meiwes was not engaging in mere fantasy. (Warning: Squamish readers should skip the entire next paragraph.)

On the evening of March 9, the two men made a video to prove that Brandes fully consented to what was about to happen. Brandes then took some sleeping pills and alcohol, but he was still alert when Meiwes cut off Brandes's penis, after being unable to bite it off (as Brandes had requested). Meiwes then sautéed the penis in a frying pan with wine and garlic. Brandes took a bite of it, then went off to a bathtub to bleed to death. A few hours later Brandes was not yet dead, so Meiwes kissed him, stabbed him in the throat, and then hung the body on a meat hook to strip off the flesh. Meiwes stored the flesh in his freezer and ate it gradually over the next ten months. Meiwes was ultimately caught, arrested, and tried, but because Brandes's participation was fully voluntary, Meiwes was convicted only of manslaughter, not murder, the first time the case went to trial.<sup>36</sup>

If your moral matrix is limited to the ethic of autonomy, you're at high risk of being dumbfounded by this case. You surely find it disturbing, and the violence of it probably activates your Care/Harm foundation. But any attempt to condemn Meiwes or Brandes runs smack into John Stuart Mill's harm principle, which I introduced in chapter 5: "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to

prevent harm to others." The next line of the original quote is: "His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant." From within the ethic of autonomy, people have a right to live their lives as they please (as long as they harm nobody), and they have a right to end their lives how and when they please (as long as they leave no dependents unsupported). Brandes chose an extraordinarily revolting means of death, but as the Penn students in my dissertation research often said, just because something is disgusting, that doesn't make it wrong. Yet most people feel that there *was* something terribly wrong here, and that it should be against the law for adults to engage in consensual activities such as this. Why?

Imagine that Meiwes served his prison sentence and then returned to his home. (Assume that a team of psychiatrists established that he posed no threat to anyone who did not explicitly ask to be eaten.) Imagine that his home was one block away from your home. Would you find his return unsettling? If Meiwes was then forced by social pressure to move out of your town, might you feel some relief? And what about the house where this atrocity happened? How much would someone have to pay you to live in it for a week? Might you feel that the strain would be expunged only if the house was burned to the ground?

These feelings—of strain, pollution, and purification—are irrational from a utilitarian point of view, but they make perfect sense in Shweder's ethic of divinity. Meiwes and Brandes colluded to treat Brandes's body as a piece of meat, to which they added the extra horror of a splash of sexuality. They behaved monstrously—as low as any humans can go on the vertical dimension of divinity that I discussed in chapter 5. Only worms and demons eat human flesh. But why do we care so much what other people choose to do with their bodies?

Most animals are born knowing what to eat. A koala bear's sensory systems are "structured in advance of experience" to