

This idea is not just ancient history; it inspired a virginity pledge movement in the United States as recently as the 1990s. The group Silver Ring Thing asks its members to vow to remain celibate and pure until marriage. Those who make the vow are given a silver ring, to wear like a wedding ring, inscribed with the name of Bible verses such as “1 Thessalonians 4:3-4.” Those verses state: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor.”⁴⁶

On the left, however, the virtue of chastity is usually dismissed as outdated and sexist. Jeremy Bentham urged us to maximize our “hedons” (pleasures) and minimize our “dolors” (pains). If your morality focuses on individuals and their conscious experiences, then why on earth should anyone *not* use their body as a playground? Devout Christians are often lampooned by secular liberals as uptight, pleasure-fearing prudes.

The Sanctity foundation is used most heavily by the religious right, but it is also used on the spiritual left. You can see the foundation’s original impurity-avoidance function in New Age grocery stores, where you’ll find a variety of products that promise to cleanse you of “toxins.” And you’ll find the Sanctity foundation underlying some of the moral passages of the environmental movement. Many environmentalists revile industrialism, capitalism, and automobiles not just for the physical pollution they create but also for a more symbolic kind of pollution—a degradation of nature, and of humanity’s original nature, before it was corrupted by industrial capitalism.⁴⁷

The Sanctity foundation is crucial for understanding the American culture wars, particularly over biomedical issues. If you dismiss the Sanctity foundation entirely, then it’s hard to understand the fuss over most of today’s biomedical contro-

verses. The only ethical question about abortion becomes: At what point can a fetus feel pain? Doctor-assisted suicide becomes an obviously good thing: People who are suffering should be allowed to end their lives, and should be given medical help to do it painlessly. Same for stem cell research: Why not take tissue from all those embryos living in suspended animation in fertility clinics? They can’t feel pain, but their tissues could help researchers develop cures that would spare sentient people from pain.

The philosopher Leon Kass is among the foremost spokesmen for Shweder’s ethic of divinity, and for the Sanctity foundation on which it is based. Writing in 1997, the year after Dolly the sheep became the first cloned mammal, Kass lamented the way that technology often erases moral boundaries and brings people ever closer to the dangerous belief that they can do anything they want to do. In an essay titled “The Wisdom of Repugnance,” Kass argued that our feelings of disgust can sometimes provide us with a valuable warning that we are going too far, even when we are morally dumbfounded and can’t justify those feelings by pointing to victims:

Repugnance, here as elsewhere, revolts against the excesses of human willfulness, warning us not to transgress what is unspeakably profound. Indeed, in this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, in which our given human nature no longer commands respect, in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational wills, repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.⁴⁸