

Famous Atheist Wonders: Could We Become Cannibals in the Future?

If made more palatable, could cannibalism become a thing in the future?

The world's most famous atheist, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, raised this question in a tweet earlier this week.

Dawkins' tweet was prompted by [an article in *The Independent*](#) which reported that "clean meat"—meat from livestock grown in a laboratory via stem cells—could be on restaurant menus by the end of 2018.

This news got Dawkins excited about the potential of a world in which men and women can eat human flesh without their consciences gnawing at them. (Sorry, cannibalism seems to lend itself to puns.)



Dawkins was not alone in making this connection. As one commenter on *The Independent's* article humorously, but somewhat plausibly, asked:



Sadly, Dawkins' thought exercise might not be as ridiculous as it seems.

Cannibalism, as Dawkins rightly notes, is a taboo. Indeed, it's one of the most persistent taboos throughout human history. But a taboo is [by definition](#) a non-rational prohibition of something—a rule that may have once had a good justification behind it, but has, over time, lost sight of

that original justification. Thus, Dawkins believes that our current aversion to cannibalism amounts to a non-rational “yuck reaction.”

To this “yuck reaction absolutism” Dawkins opposes the “consequentialist morality” that is in vogue today. Consequentialism is a moral theory which holds that an act should be judged as good purely based on whether its positive consequences outweigh its negative consequences. It is a vague, relativistic theory of morality, but arguably it’s the type of morality that a significant portion of the Western world subscribes to today.

So then, under the right conditions, consequentialism could potentially allow for cannibalism. A consequentialist—one who isn’t completely off his rocker—would most likely oppose killing a human being to obtain his meat, or harvesting human beings so that you could, from time to time, slice off some of their limbs for food.

But human meat grown from stem cells, in a lab, without having to kill or harm anyone? According to a consequentialist, that might just be good eatin’.



The typical conservative retort to Dawkins was summarized by Wesley J. Smith in the [National Review](#): that the prohibition of all forms of cannibalism is rooted in “the unique, equal, and inherent dignity of every human life.”

The unique and inherent dignity of human life. It’s an intellectual abstraction that gets trotted out in response to every perceived threat to conservative morality. But precisely because it’s an abstraction, it’s easy to toss aside for the sake of convenience, or novelty, or efficiency, and it’s easy to manipulate to justify a multitude of actions. I’m guessing that Dawkins would not see using human stem cells to create meat in a lab as an affront to human dignity, and attempts to

oppose him on that front would quickly devolve into sophistry.

To be fair to Smith, I believe he uses the phrase “dignity of human life” as a signpost for the Judeo-Christian system of belief in which it is rooted. But when the Judeo-Christian metaphysics no longer has intellectual supremacy, and ceases to be lived out in real and tangible ways, then the phrase “dignity of human life” gradually loses its meaning.

“If God does not exist, everything is permitted.”