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Article

On Thinking the Unthinkable: Disgust, Sentientism, and Zoophilia

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Abstract: I have two aims here. First, I defend the practice of seriously entertaining "disgusting" ideas in philosophy and ethics, even when the very act of discussion provokes anger or revulsion. I develop three familiar motivations (curiosity, Millian fallibilism, and the historical unreliability of disgust) and add a fourth, a Feyerabendian ethos of *proliferation*, according to which intellectual health requires the deliberate construction of disruptive alternatives, including positions one does not antecedently endorse. Second, I offer a critique of a recent argument that zoophilia is morally permissible within a broadly antispeciesist and nonanthropocentric framework, and in particular of the claim that some zoophilic acts need not involve animal suffering. I grant much of that argument, yet contend that the conclusion is not robust because it relies on excessive idealization of human psychology. In any world inhabited by humans as they are, the social meaning of zoophilia, together with widespread, refractory disgust responses, predictably produces suffering. My core claim is not that disgust tracks moral truth, but that non-ideal ethical evaluation must treat stable features of human affect as part of the causal structure of suffering. The practical result is a case against normalizing zoophilia (and closely related simulacra). I close by confronting the most obvious objection, that my proposal would justify a "prejudice veto". I argue that a true sentientist must bite the bullet and admit that even the disgust-mediated suffering of the bigoted and prejudiced deserves moral consideration.

Keywords: sexual ethics; animal ethics; moral permissibility; antispeciesism; moral psychology; social normalization; non-ideal ethics; freedom of inquiry

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1. Introduction

In the present article, I set upon myself two goals.

The first goal is to defend the practice of considering ideas that many people find disgusting, offensive, or simply "beyond the pale". In particular, I am motivated both by the moral view recently defended by Bensto (2023)[1] and by the reaction to it, a kind of moral nausea directed not only at the conclusion, but at the very treatment of the topic as a permissible object of consideration. Much of the reaction came down to the question: "Why on Earth would anyone *even entertain* such ideas, and why give them the dignity of philosophical scrutiny?"

My second goal is to put forward a case against the original author's view, at least in the form in which it is presented. My instinctive pull, like Bensto's, is towards a sentientist ethics, and I am sympathetic to the thought that pleasure and suffering are central to moral appraisal. However, I contend that Bensto's permissibility argument abstracts excessively from the social and psychological conditions under which permissibility is to be assessed. In effect, Bensto's argument hinges on showing that an act does not *in itself* produce suffering, wherefrom the inference to non-wrongness (permissibility) is made. The crucial qualification is "in itself" – I contend that this bracketing is not an inconsequential act of philosophical precision because, while salient, the question of whether the act itself produces suffering does not account for all relevant sentientist considerations. If social toleration or normalization of the practice predictably produces suffering in humans as they are, that suffering too belongs within the moral appraisal (Arandjelović, 2021). In other words, the bracketing is an excessive abstraction that prunes away morally salient *considerata*, smuggling in a picture of human beings as purely rational and psychologically plastic. In reality, the human mind is not an abstract thinking automaton. More specifically, there are stable features of human affect, including disgust responses, that are difficult to blunt, let alone extinguish, and that shape social life. Given those features, the social acceptance (or even normalization) of zoophilia is predictably suffering-producing, which is enough to undermine the practical case for permissibility for creatures like us, even if one grants that some carefully specified act-token might not be wrong *as such* when considered apart from its social meaning.

2. Thinking Disgusting Thoughts

Refusing even to discuss a topic on the grounds of its moral repugnancy is a rhetorically and affectually powerful response to a challenge, one that in a swift move changes the target of a dispute. If successful, it turns a first-order question (if *X* is permissible) into a second-order one (if it is permissible to ask whether *X* is permissible). In practice, the refusal acts as a dialectical foreclosure, a kind of imposed thought taboo.

One can grant that some dialectical foreclosures can be justified on welfarist grounds, since there are readily conceivable contexts in which discussion is gratuitously harmful. Yet, as a general stance towards controversial or unpleasant topics, I contend that it is epistemically corrosive because it seeks to impose the standard whereby certain moral feelings are treated as being *prima facie* so authoritative that they can pre-empt scrutiny. Perhaps this, or why it should be regarded as undesirable, is not obvious. Thus, to support my claim, I will present four arguments in favour of considering and discussing ideas that we presently find disgusting.

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[1] "Bensto" is a pseudonym.

2.1. Thinking for Its Own Sake

There is a straightforward intellectual justification for entertaining controversial ideas: intellectuals derive genuine pleasure from pushing boundaries of thought. To such individuals, the exercise of reason on difficult, provocative questions provides its own reward – curiosity for curiosity's sake, thinking for the sake of thinking. Just as mathematicians may pursue abstract problems with no immediate practical application, or as physicists may explore theoretical questions about the fundamental structure of the physical world without regard for the instrumental value of this pursuit, philosophers engage with difficult moral questions because the exercise of systematic thought on challenging problems is intrinsically valuable – to *them*.

Indeed, philosophy has always concerned itself with questions that make people uncomfortable; Socrates, for example, was famously executed for supposedly corrupting the youth through his disruptive questioning of conventional ideas about virtue and piety. The history of philosophy is replete with thinkers who challenged prevailing orthodoxies on precisely those topics that provoke greatest controversy, such as sexuality, religion, politics, and social organization – finding a question disgusting does not exempt it from rational scrutiny if we are committed to following arguments where they lead.

I am sympathetic to this argument and I would not be surprised if a significant portion of this journal's readership were too. However, the argument lacks persuasive power. Those who do not already share the expressed temperament will remain unmoved. *To persuade*, we need different grounds for defending the examination of repugnant ideas and for providing a normative impetus.

2.2. Millian Dissent

A more persuasive justificatory argument is Millian. Mill identifies three reasons why freedom of discussion is essential. First, the silenced opinion might be true, in which case suppressing it deprives us of truth. Second, the silenced opinion might be false but contain elements of truth, and through discussion we can distinguish between the two (and then benefit from what is true). Third, even if the prevailing opinion is entirely true and the challenge entirely false, the confrontation prevents our true belief from degenerating into prejudice held without rational foundation (Mill, 1859).

The third reason is particularly relevant to our present concern. Mill argues that we must try our best to formulate ideas that challenge the *status quo*, however firmly we may hold our present convictions, because without such challenges, our beliefs risk becoming accepted with automatism rather than grounded in understanding. He holds that even if we possess the truth, without vigorous opposition our belief "will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth" (Mill, 1859). When we refuse to entertain challenges to our moral beliefs on grounds of disgust alone, we become unable to articulate why certain acts are wrong beyond asserting that they are disgusting – we have failed to test the grounds for our beliefs and instead simply feel revulsion, mistaking that feeling for moral understanding. Some (e.g., emotivists) may say that there *is no* further understanding to be had, that disgust and revulsion are irreducible. That may very well be so, but to *convince ourselves* of it, the opposite must first be considered.

Mill's framework suggests that even our most deeply held moral convictions benefit from challenge. The person who has never confronted a serious argument for a position

they find abhorrent has not truly tested their own beliefs – they hold their position not through understanding but through the accident of their upbringing and social context. As Mill notes, the causes that make a person Christian in England would have made them Muslim had they been born in Saudi Arabia (Mill, 1859). Without subjecting our beliefs to rigorous challenge, we cannot distinguish between convictions we hold for good reasons and convictions we hold merely due to contingencies that need not track moral truth.

Bensto's article, at the very least, serves this Millian function, forcing those who find zoophilia impermissible to articulate why, beyond merely reporting their disgust – it impels us to identify the principles underlying our moral intuitions or to consider revising them. Do we oppose zoophilia because animals cannot consent? If so, what does this imply for our treatment of animals in other contexts? Do we oppose it because it causes harm? Then we must specify what harm and to whom. The exercise of responding to the argument strengthens our own position, provided we approach it seriously instead of summarily dismissing it.

2.3. Feyerabend and the Virtue of Disruption

Feyerabend takes the Millian point and extends it further yet. Mill thinks dissent is valuable because it tests belief – his claim is firmly epistemic. Feyerabend, in contrast, treats dissent as constitutive of intellectual vitality, advocating *proliferation*, the deliberate invention of alternative theories and perspectives, including ones that strike us as absurd or perverse, because they expand the space of criticism and reveal hidden assumptions (Feyerabend, 1975). The two ideas may appear similar, but their methodological commitments differ substantially. Mill gives us a reason not to silence dissent *once it appears*. In contrast, Feyerabend gives us a reason to *generate alternatives deliberately*, even when we do not believe them, because entrenched frameworks often constrain in advance which alternatives are admissible. Feyerabend's point concerns more than the epistemology of science, advocating a particular intellectual *ethos*. What is important to understand is that on this view, ethos is not mere flourish, an optional and hopefully instrumentally useful add-on to science; rather, it is constitutive of science as a practice.

A vivid example can be found in Feyerabend's discussion of astrology – in *Science in a Free Society* he includes "The Strange Case of Astrology", framed as a response to a manifesto by "186 leading scientists" denouncing astrology (Feyerabend, 1978). It would be a mistake to suppose that Feyerabend is defending astrology – his goal is not to advocate astrology because he believes it to be true, but rather to showcase how even scientists' correct beliefs can nevertheless be dogmatic and poorly thought through. Feyerabend uses the case as an illustration of how easily institutional authority gets confused with methodological virtue. Pigliucci, not exactly an ardent supporter of Feyerabend, correctly notes that Feyerabend's defence is best read as a protest against a style of scientistic gatekeeping, rather than as astrological evangelism (Pigliucci, 2020).

The relevance of the attitude championed by Feyerabend for the present debate is clear: a community's reacting to a claim with disgust and immediately trying to delegitimize inquiry itself is precisely the kind of behaviour that calls for deliberate disruption. The aim thereof is not mischief and troublemaking, but epistemic robustness.

2.4. Historical Lessons

My further argument is historical. Many things now regarded as morally unremarkable were not long ago treated as disgusting. Interracial marriage is the obvious example. In the United States anti-miscegenation laws persisted well into the twentieth century, and the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which struck down state laws prohibiting interracial marriage, is recent enough to embarrass anyone tempted to treat prevailing moral feelings as self-authenticating (Pascoe, 2009; Supreme Court of the United States, 1967). At the time, 72 percent of Americans opposed the decision (Livingston and Brown, 2017).

Clearly, not every current moral disgust will be vindicated as mere prejudice; not every past one was either. The important realization is just that disgust has a poor record as a guide to moral truth, and that alone urges thoughtful reflection. Our scientific understanding of disgust adds weight to this conclusion – disgust likely evolved as a protective response appropriate for our evolutionary environment, driving pathogen avoidance, boundary maintenance, and group signalling, not for tracking moral truths or reasons (Kelly, 2011; Miller, 1997). If this understanding is correct, the feeling of moral disgust should serve as motivation for further investigation, not as grounds for drawing a conclusion.

A critic may object that a false comparison is being made between a morally neutral act that is interracial marriage, and one that seems intrinsically degrading. But it is precisely there that the problem lies, namely in distinguishing what is morally relevant from what merely *seems* morally relevant at present. Those who opposed interracial marriage (or indeed those who still do, fewer as they may be) also often premised it on their feeling that it *is* intrinsically degrading. I shall return to this question in Section 4.

3. Contra Fira Bensto

Having defended the value of entertaining ‘disgusting’ ideas, I now turn to challenging Bensto’s substantive thesis. In brief, I accept much of the ground on which Bensto’s argument rests but reject the action-guiding conclusion he draws from it.

3.1. The Argument

Bensto positions his thesis as broadly antispeciesist and nonanthropocentric, rejecting human exceptionalism as well as tradition, *status quo*, human or animal essence, and theological claims as grounds for moral judgement. Although they do not comprise the entirety of the argument, welfare and sentient experience do important work in Bensto’s case for the permissibility of zoophilia. Specifically, in the present context, the claim is that if an act causes no suffering and may even involve pleasure, that is morally relevant. Taking, as Bensto does, zoophilia to refer to romantic or sexual relationships between humans and non-human animals, the argument can be roughly summarized as follows:

(1) Moral appraisal should not rely on tradition, *status quo*, or “dubious appeals to naturalness”. Acts and practices should instead be evaluated by considering harm, welfare, consent, antispeciesist consistency, and related morally relevant features.

(2) Some instances of sexual interaction between humans and animals do not cause the animal pain, bodily damage, or psychological distress, and may plausibly even be pleasurable for the animal.
(3) The standard objection that animals cannot consent is too demanding and anthropomorphic. Animals can express willingness and refusal through behavioural cues. On many plausible conceptions of consent, this is sufficient.
(4) Therefore, at least some instances of zoophilia are morally permissible, and the burden of argument against this position lies with critics (Bensto, 2023).

This is a substantive argument, one that cannot be dismissed as sophistry or by simply appealing to the repugnancy of its conclusion – Bensto does not ask us to accept anything particularly extraordinary and this is why I consider the view worth discussing. It is philosophically appealing and yet the conclusions seem counter-intuitive, illustrating Mill's points perfectly.

3.2. The Shared Ground

As regards the premises that Bensto *does* state, I find myself in overwhelming agreement. Let me make the shared ground explicit.

First, I agree that sentient experience – specifically, the experience of pleasure (in a wide sense) or suffering – constitutes a cornerstone of ethics. This experience is morally salient independently of social convention – if an action causes suffering, cultural endorsement does not provide moral absolution. However, I stress that my argument does not require the premise that sentient welfare is *all* that matters morally. Second, I agree that disgust alone does not provide a compelling reason to condemn what elicits that disgust. As I illustrated with historical examples in Section 2.4, oftentimes we find that what was once thought disgusting is morally unobjectionable upon reflection. Third, I grant a premise closely related to Bensto's rejection of appeals to 'naturalness', though with a crucial caveat that is key to my counter-thesis and that I elaborate shortly. Where we agree is that appeals to descriptive facts about 'nature' are normatively impotent – many natural things are terrible and suffering-inducing, while many 'unnatural' things serve to promote well-being and welfare.

At this point it may seem as if I have painted myself into a proverbial corner, having agreed with just about everything Bensto claimed and leaving nothing to latch on to in making an opposing case. Therein is the key problem with Bensto's argument, namely in what *it does not consider*. Bensto's argument hinges on isolating the act-type *in itself*, stripping away the reality of human psychology and social existence that surround it, and then asking whether the remainder – the act-type considered in abstraction – is harmful. My claim is that, given the world as it is, this stripping-away removes morally salient content, making the remainder an incomplete object of evaluation if the conclusion is to guide social acceptance or normalization rather than merely describe a highly abstract act-type.

3.3. The Real Role of Disgust

I am in agreement with Bensto about disgust not providing a moral reason. Evidence from work in moral psychology adds weight to this view. For example, moral judgment is often driven by quick affective intuitions, with reasoning providing justification *post hoc*,

as captured by Haidt's social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001). Moreover, work on disgust specifically suggests that disgust can incline people to judge that no one ought to engage in a practice they themselves merely decline to engage in (Pizarro et al., 2011). Disgust also appears to influence judgments of the severity of an offence and moral condemnation in ways that are not straightforwardly truth-tracking (Inbar et al., 2009).

Yet, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that disgust is morally irrelevant. As a psychological state, it is morally relevant insofar as it is a state of distress. Thus, any account of morality that is sensitive to the importance of welfare has to take disgust into account. Bensto has not done so, so let us remedy that and put disgust back into the picture now. Consider a society that accepts zoophilia as permissible. Here are two predictable consequences:

(a) Many people experience intense distress at the thought that such acts occur and are socially tolerated.
(b) The distress is not confined to private feeling, but instead affects trust and intimacy.

On the other side of the balance, social acceptance would also reduce significant suffering among zoophiles by alleviating frustration, as well as the fear and social isolation that concealment can produce – that reduction in suffering must be considered too. Lest I be misunderstood, I do not assume that disgust-mediated suffering automatically outweighs it; my claim is only that Bensto's argument cannot support social normalization while ignoring the suffering thus produced.

There are three ways of responding to this. One can either (i) deny that the distress matters morally, (ii) insist that people should be educated out of the disgust response, or (iii) acknowledge that the distress matters but deny that it is sufficiently intense, durable, or widespread to outweigh the reduction in suffering among zoophiles brought about by social acceptance. The first response seems implausible on the assumption that ethics must give sentient welfare serious moral weight – if a moral theory centres on sentient experience, then it cannot fence-off certain cases in an *ad hoc* manner. If a sensible, *ex ante* way of formulating eligibility criteria is possible, the onus is on Bensto to specify it; nothing related is mentioned in his original paper. The second response is more robust, and it connects with the 'prejudice veto' worry. I will return to it in detail in Section 4 but for now, note that this response tacitly concedes my core point that the sentience-based permissibility claim depends on a project of emotional transformation – that is already a retreat from the original permissibility claim *simpliciter*. The third response is also serious, for it points out that showing that disgust causes some suffering is not enough – the suffering must be of sufficient magnitude and persistence if it is to affect the overall appraisal. I address this issue by making my argument conditional, specifically on the relevant disgust externalities being widespread, intense, and resistant to affective change.

3.4. Harm, Offence, and Suffering

It is worth considering the familiar liberal distinction between harm and offence, most prominently developed by Feinberg (1985), which at first sight may appear to threaten my argument. If disgust at zoophilia constitutes merely offence rather than harm, whereas Bensto is concerned with whether an act is harmful, then one might argue that I have tacitly changed the subject, answering a question about harm by appealing to a categorically different and morally weaker kind of disvalue. This objection deserves careful treatment.

First, to be clear, I do not deny the distinction. Offence is indeed often weaker, more diffuse, and less morally urgent than harm, and it is reasonable to think that transient irritation or offended sensibility should usually carry little moral weight. Nevertheless, offence can give rise to genuine suffering, and the difference between harm and offence does not mean that the latter is morally irrelevant (Arandjelović, 2023). This is especially so given that Bensto's view grants moral importance to experienced welfare. If a practice predictably produces intense and enduring distress among many people, whether because of the acts themselves or because of what their social acceptance signifies, the fact that this distress is mediated by offence does not make it morally irrelevant.

The issue, then, is not whether offence is identical with, or in the relevant sense equivalent to, harm but whether some offence-mediated distress can be morally weighty enough to affect social normalization. My contention is that it can. The way we regard corpse desecration provides a useful analogy: the dead person cannot suffer, yet desecrating a corpse can cause grief and a sense of violation among the living, partly because many people respond viscerally to the mistreatment of human remains and partly because they regard the body as still connected with the person who died and as deserving of respect. Similarly, even if a zoophilic act causes no direct suffering to the animal, its social toleration may still cause substantial and persistent distress to others.

3.5. Non-Ideal Permissibility

Bensto's argument is most charitably read as a claim about objective wrongness, stating that the act is not wrong *as such*, given his antispeciesist and nonanthropocentric assumptions and the premise that at least some instances involve neither animal suffering nor insufficiently meaningful animal participation. With that carefully bounded claim I agree. However, it is a claim concerning something that is of little practical, action-guiding value. I suggest that we need to be discussing *non-ideal permissibility* instead, that is, permissibility evaluated under realistic constraints that include the predictable psychological, social, and institutional consequences of permitting and normalizing a practice among humans as they are, rather than among idealized agents under stylized conditions. The situation is similar to the familiar distinction between a criterion of rightness and a socially usable moral code – a practice might be abstractly permissible in an artificially isolated case, while nevertheless being a poor proposal for social acceptance once the effects of a permissive norm are taken into account. My response to Bensto is thus in the form of the following non-ideal permissibility claim:

> *Even if a practice is not intrinsically wrong, it can be impermissible to normalize for beings like us because of stable psychological and social facts that make the practice predictably suffering-inducing at scale.*

This does not seem particularly controversial either practically or methodologically. As regards the former, everyday moral reasoning already commonly grants that some action may be acceptable in principle, and yet given the incentives and predictable consequences thereof (the 'real-world', in short) be discouraged or treated as socially proscribed. Methodologically, my point is that an appraisal intended to guide social acceptance must consider the practice as it operates through actual human psychology and social institutions, rather than treat it as detached from those contingent conditions.

3.6. The Externalities of Disgust

I use the term *disgust externality* to refer to the predictable suffering imposed on third parties by the widespread knowledge that a practice is occurring and socially accepted, where the suffering is mediated by stable disgust reactions rather than by direct harm. My previous claim can then be sharpened to stand as follows:

> *If a practice has substantial and persistent disgust externalities for humans as they are, then any permissibility claim that abstracts from those externalities is non-robust as an argument for social acceptance or normalization.*

There are two features of this claim that are worth emphasising, one concerning contingency and the other conditionality. Concerning the former, I do not regard disgust reactions to zoophilia as metaphysically authoritative or necessary, nor do I assume that they are immutable. The inference I make is not from revulsion to wrongness. Rather, my argument rests on the observation that revulsion produces suffering, and that this suffering matters morally given the very welfare-sensitive ground that makes the absence of animal suffering morally relevant in the first place. As regards conditionality, insofar as disgust externalities are malleable, the argument against normalization diminishes accordingly. In short, I do not claim impermissibility *simpliciter*, nor do I outright reject that it may be possible that our disgust at zoophilia could be changed.

The debate therefore entangles empirical and psychological considerations. Specifically, the questions relevant to my case are whether disgust reactions to zoophilia are (i) widespread, (ii) intense, and (iii) resistant to change through moral socialization. If these conditions obtain, then ethics that is sensitive to welfare must account for the resulting suffering. Importantly, existing empirical evidence bears directly on the latter, indicating that disgust responses are not mere propositional attitudes and are often resistant to rational argument alone. Work in moral psychology and philosophy of emotion illuminates the underlying mechanisms, showing that disgust responses can form early in development, be cue-driven, and respond only partially to reflective endorsement or disavowal (Kelly, 2011; Miller, 1997; Pizarro et al., 2011). Even if specific triggers vary across cultures, the underlying capacity appears widespread, and sexual disgust in particular is frequently connected to pathogen-avoidance and norm-governance systems (Kelly, 2011; Miller, 1997). While none of this shows immutability, it does suggest that large-scale affective change cannot be assumed to be straightforward or without moral cost.

3.7. Reactions as Evidence

The public reaction to Bensto's paper does not itself constitute an argument. However, the value of the reaction here lies in the concrete, though limited, evidence it provides for the empirical premise behind my thesis. In particular, it is reasonable to infer that contemplating zoophilia and arguments for its social acceptance caused distress among at least some of those responding, though not the intensity or permanence of that distress, or indeed the degree to which the responses are representative of what the effects of actual social normalization would be. I present a small sample to illustrate my point. Bensto (2023)'s paper was published in late 2023, immediately triggering commentary across the media. A *Big Think* piece framed the paper as a test of open-mindedness

and explicitly foregrounded the sense that moral prejudice, not just argument, drives taboo enforcement (Thomson, 2023). A *Mercator* commentary characterized the paper as "repugnant" and used it as a reductio of non-theistic moral frameworks (Cook, 2023). Singer himself publicized the paper while (at least in some venues) distancing endorsement from publication (Singer, 2023). A philosophy-and-psychology podcast episode discussed it at length in a register that mixed seriousness with incredulity, which itself is a sign of how unusual it is to treat the topic as a candidate for ordinary moral analysis (Very Bad Wizards, 2023).

3.8. Unpleasant Implications

A natural impulse at this stage may be to look for a principled way of constraining the thesis to avoid its most uncomfortable generalizations. One may, for example, try to draw a line between public acceptance and private toleration, holding that the former, but not the latter, induces the *relevant* distress. Promising as the proposal may seem at first sight, it does not succeed. Even if a practice is conducted privately, the mere public knowledge that it is tolerated can alter the affective texture of social life – for many people, toleration is not a neutral position but rather an implicit admission of non-wrongness. Toleration reflects a society's willingness to treat the practice as part of the shared social existence, and the very knowledge that such acts may be taking place in private can result in chronic suspicion about who might be engaging in them and concealing them, as well as in a pervasive sense of contamination. In that respect, the relevant externality is triggered by common knowledge of toleration, not by overt public exhibition.

A different strategy could try to appeal to some form of equal standing and to treat the relevant disutilities as morally decisive only when they do not involve denying some group the pursuit of its life project. This approach fails too, merely relocating the controversy, as the eligibility criterion for this kind of equal social standing is precisely what is contested. How could an equal standing criterion, specified *ex ante*, distinguish between what one might see as a morally rightful objection to zoophilia and what one might see as a morally wrongful objection to homosexuality? How would that criterion account for vegans' plausible call that on the same grounds their suffering should count more than that of meat-eaters whom they see as wrongdoers?

Or one might then appeal to a kind of Aristotelian centrality of human flourishing. Plausibly, certain forms of desire are so central to a person's good that suppressing their expression is an especially severe harm. Yet, this answer too fails as a solution within the bounds of sentientism. A homophobe can just as well insist that a prohibition is for the good of those prohibited, just as various forms of temperance are widely thought to be good even when they oppose immediate desire, such as refraining from undiscoverable cheating. Conversely, a zoophile can claim that their orientation is central to their flourishing no less than a homosexual can. What these examples make apparent is that sentientism must recognize all such claims as relevant to welfare, but cannot adjudicate between them without additional, non-sentientist premises about which goods and self-understandings deserve regard, and to what degree.

The foregoing discussion brings out what I claim is the key point: if one accepts a welfare-centred ethics and also that some disgust responses are widespread and hedonically costly to extinguish, then it should not be surprising that the theory need not support whatever a contemporary liberal culture happens to treat as obvious and

non-negotiable. In a world in which, say, homophobic disgust were both pervasive and genuinely non-malleable, the resulting disvalue would have to be counted together with the disvalue generated by suppression. One may still judge, all things considered, that the latter dominates and that the former is a cost worth bearing, but the point is that this further judgement cannot be delivered by sentientism alone. Those who insist that such costs must be treated as morally irrelevant are thereby departing from strict sentientism and importing additional principles (e.g., autonomy, equality, or dignity).

At this point the reader may reasonably worry that my argument comes uncomfortably close to legal moralism. Devlin's work comes to mind (Devlin, 1965). Devlin famously appealed to the "intolerance, indignation and disgust" of the reasonable person, or the "man in the Clapham omnibus", when defending the legal enforcement of morals in the context of debates about homosexual conduct. There is indeed a superficial resemblance between my argument and Devlin's. Yet, it is the difference between the two that is important here: Devlin used shared disgust as part of a case for criminal prohibition; I argue no such thing. The question I target concerns social normalization, not legal punishment, and criminalization itself predictably generates grave costs through punishment and the fear of punishment. A strict welfare-centred view in Devlin's context would indeed have had to count the suffering of those disgusted by homosexual conduct. If that suffering had genuinely been widespread and refractory, it would have provided some reason against normalization, but it would not by itself have justified criminalization, because that reason could have been outweighed by the suffering imposed through suppression. A further concern is that the analogy with same-sex relations is historically fragile – same-sex relations have taken many forms across cultures, and caution is needed when projecting the modern notion of homosexuality into the past (Halperin, 1990). Still, there are well-known cases in which same-sex practices were socially intelligible, sometimes institutionalized, and not simply treated as deviant (Dover, 1978; Halperin, 1990). The historical record of zoophilic acts appears different in this respect, for while references to such acts can be found in myth, law, taboo, and historical testimony, I know of no evidence of anything resembling comparable public and normative acceptance. This contrast gives some reason to resist the suggestion that contemporary disgust toward zoophilia is a straightforward repetition of past disgust toward same-sex relations.

4. The Prejudice Concern

The view I put forward in the present paper readily lends itself to a specific critique: the objector may say that the advocated recognition of suffering irrespective of its cause, justification, or reasonableness undermines the view's own stability. The racist, the speciesist, the sexist, or another -ist, may rightly – or so it might seem on one reading of my account – point out that anti-racist, anti-speciesist, anti-sexist, and other similarly egalitarian policies and norms cause *them* suffering. I acknowledge that this is a serious objection, and thus I answer it directly.

My answer is to bite the bullet and acknowledge that yes, the suffering of the prejudiced matters too. And this means that their disgust, which mediates this suffering, *is* morally relevant. That should not be overly problematic in itself – after all, we do not deny moral consideration even to individuals who commit the most grievous of crimes and injustices. The problem arises not from the recognition of suffering of the prejudiced but rather from the conflict that emerges when suffering needs to be distributed, that is, when

reducing the suffering of one group appears to necessitate an increase in the suffering of another. Reducing the relevant suffering of racists is easily accomplished by taking away the rights of the races they consider inferior but that comes at the cost of inflicting suffering on the individuals whose rights are thus taken away. The answer here seems easy: do not appease the racists, even if that leaves some suffering unaddressed. However, as I highlight in Section 2.4, the problem is that of distinguishing justifiable from unjustifiable disgust and suffering in a manner that tracks morally relevant features and not merely historically contingent social development. This is why sentientism alone cannot settle the matter and why additional principles are needed to determine what ought to be done when reducing suffering for one group increases it for another.

Let us see how one might reason about the challenge. One simple and sound-seeming criterion appears to be readily available: malleability. In other words, one may say that if a disgust response is susceptible to change, e.g., through moral education and social contact, then the suffering mediated by that particular response is morally irrelevant (or at least *less* morally relevant). This is an appealing suggestion at first sight. However, I contend that it does not succeed as a hard admissibility criterion. Malleability is certainly relevant, and if a disgust response can be changed easily and without significant cost, then its weight in the long-term moral calculus correspondingly diminishes. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to infer from this that suffering mediated by a malleable response is morally inconsequential. While moral education and social pressure may be justified, and sometimes even morally required (Arandjelović, 2024), those options still do not make the *presently experienced* suffering vanish.

Instead, one might be drawn to consider the object at which the disgust is directed. Perhaps the criterion can be that for disgust to count as morally relevant it must be directed at an *act-type* rather than at persons in virtue of an intrinsic trait (race, disability, etc.). While initially attractive, this proposal fails too. One reason is that it is difficult to see what *moral* role the qualifier 'intrinsic' can possibly play. How does something become less or more moral by virtue of being intrinsic? On this view, disgust at homosexual acts would be morally qualifying (whereas that at suppressed homosexual desire would not). That does not seem acceptable.

My solution is simple. A true sentientist has to say that all suffering counts for equal *consideration*. Lest I be misunderstood, by this I mean that suffering does not become morally irrelevant merely because it arises from an objectionable attitude, not that all suffering, even when phenomenally identical, must be given the same weight. The practical moral significance of a particular instance of suffering depends on further considerations, including the responsibility of the sufferer, the competing claims and rights of others, and the costs that would have to be incurred to relieve it. Thus, yes, the anguish of a Nazi at the existence of Jews remains morally relevant suffering, but it does not follow from that alone that it can offset the suffering of Jewish victims, still less that persecution could be permissible. Any such conclusion would require additional assumptions that sentientism alone does not provide.

One may observe that this leads to conclusions which seem unacceptable. For example, the view I put forward suggests that in a world in which some people's homophobia is so deeply ingrained that it cannot be wilfully overcome, the suffering caused by the disgust of the homophobic has to be considered, *ceteris paribus*, on an equal footing (equal consideration, not equal weight) with the suffering of homosexual individuals if they are denied the ability to express their sexuality freely. I do not deny

that this conclusion follows. Many will find this beyond the pale. However, I respond that there *is* a reasonable response: to treat non-voluntary, deeply entrenched disgust as a predictable source of disvalue that cannot be assumed away, and that instead has to be dealt with pragmatically.

Evolutionary considerations matter here in a specific, limited way. Our disgust response is not an arbitrary behavioural trait but, at least in part, an evolved feature that regulates, *inter alia*, contact with contaminants and sexual behaviour in ways that plausibly reduced pathogen and reproductive risks. While this descriptive claim does not imply that disgust tracks moral truth, it does predict that certain disgust responses may be stable, widespread, and difficult to extinguish even under sustained moral socialization. In such cases the aspiration to make the disvalue disappear by demanding change becomes a kind of ethical wishful thinking – a hedonically costly make-believe in its own right. Recognizing this refocuses our attention away from ill-conceived attempts at finding the solution in metaphysics and towards the practical question of how to balance justice, equality, and other values when it becomes unavoidable that suffering is inflicted on somebody. The bottom line is that in such cases the cost is not eliminable. Sentientism, if it is to be a serious, real-world programme, must be prepared to contend with that fact.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have pursued two distinct but related arguments. First, I have defended the value of entertaining ideas that provoke moral disgust. Drawing on Mill's arguments about the vitality of challenged beliefs and historical examples of moral progress, I have argued that questioning our firmest convictions serves important epistemic and moral functions – the willingness to think disgusting thoughts is not merely acceptable but necessary for moral progress and genuine understanding.

Second, I have argued that despite this intellectual openness, there are good reasons to reject Bensto's thesis about the permissibility of zoophilia. Importantly, my target was social acceptance and normalization, not legal status. I accept that sentient welfare is morally central but not that it is the sole basis of moral consideration, and I also insist on taking psychologically realistic constraints into account. Thus, given the depth of existing disgust reactions to zoophilia, and given the suffering such reactions can produce when triggered, I conclude that zoophilia is a poor candidate for social acceptance in human societies as they are. Evidently, this conclusion is contingent on empirical facts about human psychology and does not imply that zoophilia is wrong in some inherent or abstract sense divorced from its effects on sentient experience. It also does not mean that the suffering imposed on zoophiles by non-normalization is irrelevant. Ultimately, my claim is that *all* the suffering that any social response to zoophilia would cause or alleviate must be considered.

A further uncomfortable, and likely controversial but also important conclusion is one I state without evasion: the thesis I developed does not, by itself, lead to the liberal recommendations that many readers will desire. For example, if disgust-driven suffering is morally relevant irrespective of its aetiology, then in a world in which, say, homophobic disgust were both pervasive and genuinely non-malleable, that suffering would have to be considered together with the suffering generated by suppression. This does not mean that the two have equal weight or offset one another one-for-one. One may still judge, all things considered, that this cost is worth incurring for the sake of other values, but such

compromises cannot be justified by refusing moral consideration to culturally inconvenient suffering.

The juxtaposition of my two arguments might seem paradoxical – I defend thinking about disgusting ideas while arguing that disgust-generated suffering has moral weight. Yet, there is no contradiction. Examining an idea hypothetically and subjecting it to rational scrutiny is quite different from endorsing it or normalizing the practice it concerns; indeed, such scrutiny can help prevent bad ideas from being adopted. Theoretical examination is necessary for moral understanding; normalization, on the other hand, may trigger the psychological reactions that produce suffering. We can and *should* think about matters as apparently extreme as zoophilia, examine arguments for their permissibility, and test our intuitions against reason. Such an intellectual exercise strengthens our understanding whether we ultimately affirm or reject our intuitions. In this case, having undertaken this examination with due seriousness, we find that the psychological reality of human disgust responses provides grounds – within an experientially grounded ethics – for resisting social normalization.

The history of moral progress teaches us humility about our intuitions, with many practices once found disgusting now recognized as entirely unproblematic or at least acceptable. The bottom line is that while disgust is not epistemically worthless, it cannot be taken as a *prima facie* indicator of impermissibility. What matters on the view I have argued for is the predictable welfare profile of normalizing a practice among humans as they are. Specifically in the case of zoophilia, I have argued that there is reason to think that widespread disgust responses are sufficiently stable and sufficiently intense that social normalization would predictably generate substantial suffering at scale. Thus, within a welfare-sensitive framework, that is a reason to resist normalization, while allowing that the recommendation could change in a different psychological context.

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