

NATURE IS PERFECT AS IT IS – OR IS IT?

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In this contribution we would like to briefly analyze the view that if something is *unnatural*, then it is morally questionable as well.

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In his 1874 classic “Essay on Nature” John Stuart Mill argues against a view that has currently been common in the discussion on the ethics of genetic engineering, namely the claim that if a human practice is unnatural in a way or another, then it is morally blameworthy, too.¹ According to Mill, the claim is either useless or plainly false. If ‘nature’ is “the collective name for everything which is”, it follows that people cannot do anything that is unnatural, and the claim is useless. If, on the other hand, nature “is everything which is itself, without voluntary human intervention”, then everything people do is unnatural. In this case the claim is plainly false, since it is clear that not all actions are morally blameworthy.²

Those who have criticized genetic engineering on the basis that it is unnatural have not accepted Mill’s reasoning. An obvious reply to Mill is that ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ can be understood in a way he did not, i.e., interpreting the concepts in such a way that the claim that all unnatural practices are morally blameworthy may be both useful and justified.³ This reply is plausible in the sense that in ordinary language the notions of natural and unnatural have various meanings. In everyday conversation the notion of unnaturalness is used for referring to things that are simply unusual or new and strange. An exceptionally large airplane can be described as unnaturally large. In

the beginning of the 19th century travelling by train was considered unnatural. Moreover, unnaturalness is also used to refer to blatantly artificial things. It is unnatural for a person to have green eyebrows and blue hair. In addition to these, the term 'unnatural' is sometimes used synonymously with 'morally wrong'. When something is regarded as morally questionable it can be called unnatural. For example, homosexuality has been said to be unnatural with the intention to pass moral judgement on people's sexual desire and conduct.

In this context an interesting sense of 'unnatural' is 'repulsive'. A person may call a practice unnatural, meaning that in her view the practice is repulsive. Interpreted this way, the *unnatural argument* is clearly worth of studying. Consider the following reasoning:

P1. Certain applications of genetic engineering are unnatural in the sense that many people consider these applications strongly repulsive.

P2. If many people consider certain applications of genetic engineering strongly repulsive, then these applications are morally problematic.

P3. Certain applications of genetic engineering are morally problematic.

The argument is valid, since P3 follows from P1 and P2. Moreover, the first premise is evidently true, since many people consider for instance transgenic cows strongly repulsive. The question is, then, whether the second premise holds. Some preliminary observations are in order. Firstly, the second premise does not assert that applications of genetic engineering are *wrong* or that applying them should be denied, if they evoke feelings of repulsion. The point is to say only that repulsion creates a moral problem (that should be taken into account in the final judgment). Secondly, the second premise does not assume that repulsion is a *moral* attitude. The attitude in question may be aesthetic, for instance. Finally, the second premise is not based on the assumption that "many people" means "few hundred people". The idea is to argue

that if a considerable part of a given society, a majority perhaps, feel repulsion towards a practice, then these feelings are morally relevant.

Then, is it true that if many people consider certain applications of genetic engineering strongly repulsive, these applications are morally problematic? Mary Midgley's answer to this question is positive. In her "Biotechnology and Monstrosity" (2000) Midgley argues that emotional responses should be taken seriously since they are often reflections of rational thought.⁴ She writes:

I am suggesting generally that the "yuk factor", this sense of disgust and outrage, is in itself by no means a sign of irrationality. Feeling is an essential part of our moral life. Heart and mind [...] are complementary aspects of a single process. Whenever we seriously judge something to be wrong, strong feeling necessarily accompanies the judgement.

In her opinion, an interest in morals that has no emotional component to it has not appreciated the full meaning of morality. Intrinsic objections to genetic engineering are often dismissed as merely products of emotion. According to Midgley,

[w]e have to articulate the thoughts that underlie emotional objections [...]. The best way to do this is often to start taking the intrinsic objections more seriously. If we look below the surface of what seems to be mere feeling we may find thoughts that show how the two aspects are connected. [...] Accordingly, when people who are worried about new technologies and complain that they are unnatural, we should try to understand what they are objecting to. We might find something serious.

Midgley's point is that although emotional responses may be irrational, there may, nevertheless, be a solid rational ground that evokes the reaction. Midgley's idea

sounds reasonable, and indeed, one might take it further and say that people's emotional reactions are morally relevant and should be taken into account when making decisions even if there were *no* rational grounds behind the reactions. This is because, in general, people's preferences and interests should be respected to a certain degree. Therefore, it seems that the above version of the unnatural argument is justified. This said, however, it is important to remember that the conclusion of the argument is somewhat weak, i.e., it does not show that certain forms of genetic engineering are morally wrong, it only shows that they have moral costs. This is a modest result, since many human activities that are clearly acceptable have some moral costs. Those who oppose genetic engineering may want to defend P2* that would make the conclusion of the unnatural argument much stronger.

P2*. If many people consider certain applications of genetic engineering strongly repulsive, then these applications are morally wrong and applying them should be denied.

P2*, however, is hardly acceptable. There are people who find certain bold artworks repulsive. Some people find gay bars offensive and, perhaps, repulsive. However, it does not follow only from reactions of disgust that something should be banned. Whether something should be banned because it offends someone should be determined by the reasons we have for accepting it despite its offending character. Art should not be censored because it would drastically limit the freedom of expression of opinion. Gay bars should not be closed because they would limit the rights of sexual minorities. Both reasons mentioned above are usually understood as being more important than the gut feelings of a part of the population. Thus, whether we should ban the use of genetic engineering on the basis of feelings of repulsion or not depends on the value of the applications. If they are beneficial to the general well-being and

health of people or the environment, it appears we do have a good reason for accepting the applications.

References

- 1 For such a view, see e.g. Anne Chapman, “Genetic Engineering: The Unnatural Argument”, A paper presented in *Nature and Technology Conference* at the University of Aberdeen in July 10, 2001.
- 2 John Stuart Mill, “Essay on Nature” in his *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1969): 373-402, esp. 377.
- 3 Ruth F. Chadwick, “Playing God”, *Cogito*, Autumn 1989: 186-193, esp.188.
- 4 Mary Midgley, “Biotechnology and Monstrosity: Why We Should Pay Attention to the ‘Yuk Factor’”, *Hastings Center Report* 30 (2000): 7-15, esp. 8-10.