

# FRA FORSKNINGSFRONTEN NATURALNESS AND UNNATURALNESS IN CONTEMPORARY BIOETHICS

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*When we seek to understand the world of nature, we do so at least partly in the hope that this will enable us to live within it more comfortably.* (Frankfurt 2004)

Bioethics is often concerned with novel processes and entities. IVF, genetic modification of crops and animals, reproductive cloning and xenotransplantation are examples of the actualities and possibilities with which bioethics must grapple. These developments give human beings the possibility of changing things that were previously beyond their control. Accordingly, it might seem it is precisely the ‘unnatural’ that generates the need for bioethical enquiry. It is paradoxical that despite this, bioethics is so polarised with respect to the moral significance of the natural. The birth of Dolly the cloned sheep is a good illustration of this. Dolly’s cloning was hailed variously as a benign breakthrough of modern science (McLaren 2000:1775–80), and an assault on nature (Kass 1998:3–61).

Many influential bioethicists who regard themselves as quintessentially rational thinkers repudiate any suggestion that ‘naturalness’ can or should play a part in moral evaluations. Others hold that nature is an important consideration in moral deliberation. The motives for the use of, or avoidance of, appeals to nature in bioethical reasoning, are coloured by an array of disciplinary, territorial, religious and political convictions.

This paper explores the ways in which concepts of the (un)natural feature in contemporary bioethical reasoning.

It sets out the bioethical issues that tend to generate most explicit discussion about the role of nature, and shows the ways in which the concept of nature feeds implicitly into other aspects of bioethical discourse. It considers the ways in which the use of, or repudiation of, concepts of nature, are associated with specific epistemological or value-based standpoints. The paper also considers how nature features in moral arguments and concerns raised in the media.

There is controversy about what constitutes bioethical methodology (Harris 2004:4). Nevertheless, there is general agreement that bioethics is an interdisciplinary field that can allow for a variety of academic approaches (Smajdor, Ives et al 2008:16). Because of this, people from many different academic and professional backgrounds may contribute to the bioethics literature. This is partly what makes bioethics such a rich endeavour. However, it has drawbacks too. Bioethicists, even when speaking to each other, cannot always assume an in-depth knowledge of any particular academic field on the part of their audience. They must therefore avoid jargon, and complex arguments or references to arcane sources, theories or concepts. In some instances, however, grappling with deep philosophical problems is an inescapable part of the project of bioethics. This is especially true of an analysis of the role of nature in bioethics: every line of enquiry leads to complex and sometimes bitter disputes, whose roots are entrenched in epistemological, theological and metaphysical problems.

## Meta-ethical and methodological considerations

Nature appears in bioethics in a number of guises and contexts. At the most basic level, people may feel that it is morally wrong to alter, distort or subvert natural processes. Leon Kass, for example, argues that an intuitive recoiling from interventions such as cloning that distort or fragment the natural processes of reproduction, is a powerful indicator that such interventions are unethical (1998:3–61). These are perhaps the most obvious occasions when nature plays an explicit role in informing moral reasoning in bioethics. However, there are many other ways in which nature colours the concepts and themes employed in bioethical deliberation. For example, bioethicists may be concerned with the natural world, or nature, especially in terms of our moral responsibility to the environment. Nature also plays a part in determining the ways in which bioethicists believe society should be constructed and in which legislation should function. Ideas of what is natural for individual humans, for families, and for states often play into arguments about disease, healthcare, and our moral rights and responsibilities towards one another.

The role of nature in bioethical deliberation cannot be understood without considering the wider philosophical debates about how if at all nature can inform ethical analysis. These meta-ethical questions about the relationship between morality and nature are particularly pressing for bioethics, given the subject matter of bioethical enquiry. Moral beliefs vary widely even within cultures, and they change over time. It has been suggested that a fear of moral relativism may impel bioethicists to seek absolute and universal moral principles (e.g. Buchanan et al 2000: 372).

Consequentialists too have to grapple with questions of objectivity and external truth, since even if they agree that the task of morality is to maximise the good, there is still the problem of ascertaining what is the good – and whether there is any objective or natural answer to this. Another way of seeking objective moral truth is through natural law theory – which explicitly endorses the idea that morality is immutable, and discoverable and can be found through contemplation and reasoning (George & Tollefsen 2007) (Tierney 1997:1150–1625). Natural law theory is also often associated with natural rights, which on some views are also deemed to be discoverable and objective (rather than constructs negotiated by human beings). The Catholic Church adopts a natural law approach to bioethics, deeming that it can offer a ‘complementary relationship of faith and reason’ (Hehir 1996: 333–6). Most of the bioethicists who apply natural law theory in their writings have religious affiliations.

## The is/ought distinction and the naturalistic fallacy

*There is no great invention, from fire to flying, which has not been hailed as an insult to some god. But if every physical and chemical invention is a blasphemy, every biological invention is a perversion. There is hardly one which, on first being brought to the notice of an observer from any nation which had not previously heard of their existence, would not appear to him as indecent and unnatural.* (Haldane 1924)

Peter Singer and Deane Wells state categorically that “... there is no valid argument from ‘unnatural’ to ‘wrong’ (2006:9-26). Similar views can be found in the work of many bioethicists. A report on the ethics of grafting human brain tissue into primates (whose authors include a number of mainstream bioethicists<sup>1</sup>) asserts: “...stipulating that research is “unnatural” says nothing about its ethics.” Gregory Pence dismisses those who would argue that natural gestation is morally important because we evolved that way: “Unfortunately, authors who argue this way usually commit (what I call) the Evolved Implies Ought fallacy which states that because human evolution to date involved practice X, therefore, practice X is moral” (2006:78).

There are two ways in which this supposed fallacy can be understood. G.E. Moore’s use of the term ‘naturalistic fallacy’ rests on the idea that terms such as ‘good’ or ‘right’ are not reducible to other properties (1993)<sup>2</sup>. Hume’s is/ought distinction<sup>3</sup>, on the other hand, refers to the habit of deriving a normative conclusion from a statement of fact. For example, even if it is a biological fact that human teeth have evolved to eat meat, it does not follow that it is morally acceptable for humans to kill and eat animals. In bioethics, both Hume’s and Moore’s points are often conflated into a single term: the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (De Vries & Gordijn 2009:193–201).

Wilson, Dietrich et al note that it is the Humean version that is usually referred to in evolutionary psychology as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (2003:669–682) and the same is true of bioethics. That is, as R. De Vries and B. Gordijn note, it is popularly accepted in bioethics that to move from a statement of biological fact to a normative conclusion is fallacious. It has been suggested, however, that those bioethicists who invoke the naturalistic fallacy may be interpreting it wrongly, and that it is only a direct move from biological fact to normative conclusion that is problematic. Laurence Landeweerd acknowledges that the is/ought distinction and the naturalistic fallacy certainly pose some serious problems for those who want to argue

from nature. However, he suggests that "...this does not mean that there cannot be a relation between descriptive accounts of our nature and ethics. It simply means that these relations are difficult to construe as causally inferable" (2004:17–23).

If one accepts Landeweerd's contention, not everyone who argues from nature in bioethics necessarily falls foul of the naturalistic fallacy. Provided that the aim is to show how the relation between nature and ethics can be construed and applied, rather than simply to move directly from is to ought, even the most critical of mainstream bioethicists might be able to find some common ground with those who argue from nature.

### Religion and rationality

*We live on the other side of a religious age. [...] The central strength and weakness of the West is precisely that it believes in nothing* (Engelhardt 1985)

The widespread dismissal of arguments from nature means that those bioethicists who adopt a natural law approach, where the appeal to nature may be more nuanced, are marginalised and demonised, according to David Oderberg<sup>4</sup>, in a piece whose bitterness and anger with 'mainstream bioethics' is evident from his choice of invective (2008:98–109). Newman is also critical of mainstream bioethics, and what he sees as its postmodern insistence on "...devaluing nature and natural distinctions". For Newman, religion is an asset to bioethics, as the religious perspective "...is less fearful of and therefore less deferential to science" (2009:101–35).

The dichotomies discussed here are largely those that exist in the English speaking world, and in the Western analytical tradition. There are, of course other approaches to bioethics, though they might not be considered mainstream. Ryuchi Ida for example, espouses a bioconservative standpoint: "in Japan, we respect the view of 'As it stands' ... This attitude expresses respect for Nature and for the natural state of the baby... Ethical appeals to the human welfare or individual happiness to justify the use of science of technology may have intuitive force in the West, but may seem alien to a non-Western audience" (cited in Bostrom & Savulescu 2008:5).

As suggested, in the West, those who openly endorse the idea of values inherent in nature are often religious – and often pro-life advocates. Bioethics is deeply divided on this point; those whom Oderberg regards as the 'mainstream' may be dismissive or openly hostile to approaches that are perceived as lacking rigour or rationality. If

Oderberg is correct that the most powerful players in bioethics set the agenda in ways that make it difficult to argue from nature, then it may be that some potential discussion of nature and its role in bioethics is stifled or discouraged at the outset, leaving only the bravest or most ardent to articulate the minority position.

The overall picture as it stands seems to be one in which mainstream bioethicists talk to each other, applying a variety of methodologies which do not openly argue from nature, and whose conclusions rarely if ever challenge certain accepted moral positions. It is significant to note that the three dismissals of variations of the naturalistic fallacy cited earlier do not ascribe these supposedly fallacious views to any specific individual; nor are they contextualised to any particular argument. The 'appeal to nature' is treated as a free-floating straw man.

This may explain the relative dearth of open debate on the role and relevance of nature in mainstream bioethical literature. This is worrying for the state of health of bioethics, since opportunities for cross fertilisation and enrichment of the academic bioethical debate are constrained, but perhaps of equal concern, the unwillingness of mainstream bioethicists to engage with arguments about naturalness may also result in a disconnect between bioethics and public moral discourse.

### The scope of 'nature' or 'the natural'

*These days, there are few notions more derided [...] than "nature" and "the natural." The term is sometimes handled by bioethicists and policy analysts, but then only with rubber gloves* (Newman 2009)

Even if one believes that 'x is bad because it is unnatural' could be true, it would be necessary to define and agree what was meant by 'unnatural' before any use could be made of this approach to bioethical reasoning. The difficulty in defining exactly what we mean by nature is not a new phenomenon, though arguably, it becomes more challenging as human beings expand their spheres of agency to include space travel, virtual intelligence, genetic modification, and other endeavours that have become possible in the past hundred years or so. John Stuart Mill suggested that there are two ways of understanding nature. Firstly, as a collective name for everything which exists (in which case everything is natural), and secondly, as a name for everything which exists/occurs independently of human intervention (1904).

Mill's point shows that either way, the term 'nature' is not on the face of it very useful for normative purposes.

Either it is devoid of content, since everything is natural, and therefore we can accept everything that human beings do. Or it cuts out too much, since it implies that building houses, or treating diabetes is unethical. Peter Singer and Deane Wells touch on this when they state '[t]here is no appropriate sense of "unnatural" in which respirators for premature babies are natural but ectogenesis<sup>5</sup> is unnatural' (2006:9–26).

Despite the reluctance of mainstream bioethicists to appeal directly to nature, it is possible to find implicit or covert appeals, assumptions and concepts in many instances. Indeed, it may be that one cannot escape this, since as discussed, assumptions about nature are already imbued in many of the moral theories and methods adopted by bioethicists. Moreover, many core concepts and themes relate at some level to ideas of nature. Some of these concepts and themes are outlined below.

### Human nature

*We unanimously rejected ethical objections grounded on unnaturalness or crossing species boundaries.* (Greene et al. 2005)

Many strands of moral reasoning rely at some level on concepts of human nature. This is therefore a significant point of enquiry for anyone attempting to explore further the question of how nature and bioethics relate to one another. Virtue ethics is one of the clearest examples of a moral framework that seeks to derive answers to ethical questions through an examination of what it means to be human, and from this, what is good for humans. For Aristotle, the morality of human behaviour cannot be separated from human nature. A good person will flourish, and flourishing is in itself a part of what it is to be good (Nussbaum 1988:32–53).

Yet one of the difficulties for bioethics is precisely the question of what is human nature. Marc Hauser argues that the underlying basics of morality are universal, not culturally dependent. He suggests that humans are in some senses hard-wired for morality: it is part of our essential nature, in the same way that language, or the capacity for language is – that is, the content is not entirely fixed, but the capability and some of the structure, is (2006). This might be thought to corroborate some aspects of the Aristotelian view of human nature as something fixed and immutable from which we can ascertain the requirements for our moral flourishing. But biomedical technology enables us to envisage ways in which we might change ourselves – perhaps in ways so fundamental that any connection

between human nature and bioethics would be severed. It would then be up to us to determine what sort of creatures we want to be.

Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu embrace this possibility, arguing in favour of moral enhancement, by means of technological interventions, if this should ever become possible. For them, whatever the current state of human nature, there is no reason to stick with it if we believe we can improve on it. For example, perhaps we could alter our genes to increase our capacities for altruism, empathy, or justice (2008:162–77). Interestingly, this is a point on which 'mainstream' bioethicists diverge; John Harris is strongly opposed to the prospect of moral enhancement, which he regards as incompatible with freedom – something which for him is a profoundly important part of human nature (2011:102–11). Harris specifies that we should be satisfied with the existing means we have for improving our moral behaviour: socialisation, education, etc., and here he strongly implies that there is a morally significant distinction between these 'natural' methods of moral enhancement, and the unnatural interventions proposed by Persson and Savulescu.

### Nature and need, correction and enhancement

One of the challenges for bioethics is to distinguish between health and disease, between needs and desires, and between correction and enhancement. This is difficult when new medical procedures and technologies are being developed that blur previously existing boundaries and call previous assumptions into question. In all of these distinctions, concepts of nature play a role, though it is not usually explicit.

One field in which these distinctions appear is that of germline engineering (making genetic changes that would be inherited by future generations). Some bioethicists argue that this is permissible if the alterations are genuinely therapeutic, rather than for example making people taller or more attractive. Marc Lappe argues that the distinction between correction and enhancement is the key to establishing the appropriate use of medical technologies. "Only the first is squarely within the domain of orthodox medicine", he asserts (1999:157).

Another way of expressing the health/disease and correction/enhancement dichotomy is the concept of normal species function. Christopher Boorse is one of the most emphatic proponents of this approach. For him, health is the absence of disease – and disease is defined by its negative impact on what is normally expected of a species (1975:49–68). On his view, homosexuality can indeed be

seen as a disease; it would clearly be detrimental to species survival if all the species members were homosexual, therefore normal species function is heterosexuality. The appeal of this approach is that it takes disease and health to be empirically discoverable, and value free, avoiding the pitfalls of the naturalistic fallacy as discussed above.

As Ian Wilmut observes, however, “[n]ot everything that happens in nature can sensibly be seen as an adaptation that truly enhances survival. Nature is quirky” (2000:52). T.H. Engelhardt is also sceptical. He points out that Boorse seems to think there is a single natural design for humans, that each individual ‘should’ match, while in fact the species may rely on a multitude of characteristics and variations, some of which we might characterise as defects or diseases but which in fact are beneficial to the species as a whole (1985:79–91). Engelhardt’s argument is that any attempt to derive health/disease boundaries through appealing to nature will not work, unless one identifies the goals that are being pursued. Boorse takes the species to have a goal – but does not clearly specify what that is. But Engelhardt suggests that we cannot escape the value component of determining health via normal species function, since the very choice of a goal is value-laden. Engelhardt’s analysis seems to embrace the blindness of natural selection, in just the way that Newman regards as being nihilistically postmodern (2009:101–35).

It may be that those who are most sceptical about natural distinctions between health and disease hold different moral commitments to the purpose of healthcare, and definition of need itself. Those who have a primarily consequentialist standpoint may not see value in the correction/enhancement distinction, and may deny that the concept of medical need has any special moral significance. If the underlying aim of medicine is to improve wellbeing, it is unimportant whether the person being treated is ‘sick’ or not. In stark contradiction to Boorse’s view, the World Health Organisation defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.<sup>6</sup> This implies that one does not necessarily have to demonstrate a clinical pathology in order to have a claim for medical treatment. Therefore, the reliance on natural or biological facts as a basis for determining need, or for distinguishing between correction and enhancement, is diminished.

## Conclusion

*Whether there is wisdom in it or not, disgust at ‘violating nature’ has a long history. ‘We should not mess around with the laws of nature’, insisted one respondent in Life*

*magazine’s survey on reproductive technologies when IVF was becoming a reality in 1969. These attitudes need probing, not simply ridiculing.* (Ball 2014:1964–65)

Hannah Landecker has suggested that bioethicists missed the point about Dolly the sheep: the real revolution was not the prospect of reproductive cloning, or the possibility of producing pharmaceuticals in milk, but the fact that something had happened which “alters what it is to be made of cellular biological matter – a change that is very much still pertinent to the present and the imminent future” (2007:225). It is this that seems to be the most significant aspect of where the unnatural fits in bioethical reasoning. There seems to be an important moral difference between the natural and the unnatural when the distinction is construed in this way. As suggested earlier, biotechnology gives us new spheres of moral responsibility. Moreover, with these developments the decision not to use newly-possible techniques is also transformed into a moral choice.

The relation between the natural and the artificial, between intervening and not intervening, is complex. Many human endeavours are aimed at countering the course of nature, and often we may have strong moral reasons for doing so. However, the temptation to rush from this to moral conclusions needs to be resisted. Those who tackle the question of what is natural or unnatural and its relationship with ethics have tended to arrive at very strong conclusions and these are often at polar opposites of the spectrum, i.e. either that there is no moral problem whatsoever, or that the unnatural is so obviously unethical, that its rejection requires little deliberation. This report attempts to show that on the contrary, deliberation is very much required. Whether or not one can derive moral answers from nature may still be a moot point, but it seems evident that human attempts to control nature generate many moral questions.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Tom Beauchamp, Hilary Bok, Andrew Siegel, Ruth Faden, among others.  
<sup>2</sup>Not everyone agrees that this is a fallacy per se.  
<sup>3</sup>“In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs: when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no propositions that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequences. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, ‘tis necessary that it should be observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it” (Hume [1740]1978:469).  
<sup>4</sup>I would not classify Oderberg himself as a bioethicist, though he writes sometimes on bioethical themes. I include his views here partly because they are striking in their attack on bioethics, and because he makes explicit his affiliation with natural law reasoning. Oderberg singles out the most controversial bioethicists, perhaps unfairly; there are many other influential thinkers in bioethics whose outlook is not aligned with Savulescu, Singer or Harris.  
<sup>5</sup>The gestation of babies in artificial wombs.  
<sup>6</sup>Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19–22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.