Naturalness and unnaturalness in contemporary bioethics

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 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 that ‘naturalness’ can or should play a part in moral evaluation. The motives for the use of, or repudiation of, concepts of nature, also 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). Contemporary consequentialists no longer 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 deriving a normative conclusion from a statement of biological fact is the Humean is/ought distinction. In bioethics, both Hume’s and Moore’s points are often misunderstood. 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 (1993:1). Hume’s is/ought distinction 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 & Gjørdin 2009:193–201).

Wilson, Dietrich et al note that it is the Human version that is usually referred to in evolutionary psychology as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (2003:660–682) and the same is true of bioethics. That is, R. De Vries and B. Gjørdin 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 Landeveder acknowledges that the is/ought distinction and the naturalistic fallacy certainly pose some serious problems for those who want to argue

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 (1998:3–6). 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 is/ought distinction and the naturalistic fallacy

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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 Landewerdt’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 it 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 have alluded to the dualism 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, in a piece whose bitterness and anger with ‘mainstream bioethics that are perceived as lacking rigour or rationality. If mainstream may be dismissive or openly hostile to approaches he sees as its postmodern insistence on “…devaluing from is to ought, even the most critical of mainstream bioethicists. Ryuchi Ida for example, espouses a bioconservative approach. There are, of course other approaches to religious questions that he suggests that “there are two ways of understanding nature. Firstly, as a collective name for everything which exists (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 view health/disease and correction enhancement dichotomy 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 argues that the underpinnings of nature are the underlying basis 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 view health/disease and correction enhancement dichotomy 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).

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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 reference to 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 it. For example, perhaps we could alter our genes to increase our capacities for altruism, empathy, or justice (2008:162–77). Importantly, 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 (2002:11). 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.

**Human nature**

We unanimously rejected ethical objections grounded on unnaturalness or creating 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 view health/disease and correction enhancement dichotomy 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).
seen as a disease; it would clearly be detrimental to spe-
cial species survival if all the species members were homosexual, therefore normal species function is heterosexual. 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, “not everything that happens in nature can sensibly be seen as an adap-
tation 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 (1999:81-91). 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 goal of a cause 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 see value in the correction and enhancement distinction, and may deny that the concept of medical need has any special moral signifi-
cance. 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.” 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. ‘You should not mess around with the laws of nature’, invited one respondent to 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 “altered 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 con-
sidered in this way. Engelhardt’s bioethicology yields 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, bet-
ween 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 to this from to moral conclusions needs to be resisted. Those who tackle the question of what is natural or unnatural and its rela-
tionship 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 at-
tempts to show that in the context of deliberation is very much required. Whether or not one can derive moral an-
swers 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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