

# Bioethics and the Moral Significance of “Gut Feelings”

## BİYOETİK VE “GÖZE ALABİLME DUYGULARININ” AHLAKİ ÖNEMİ

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### Summary

The view that unnatural things are somehow morally suspicious is repeatedly raised in discussions on bio- and gene technology. The so-called unnatural argument is, nevertheless, useful only when the exact meaning of ‘natural’ is defined. In gene technology an interesting definition of ‘unnatural’ is ‘repulsive’. It can be argued that if an application or end product of an application evokes feelings of repulsion in a considerable amount of people, then it is morally suspicious.

In this paper, we will distinguish between respecting people’s feelings as such as a morally justifiable action and the view that repulsion may be an indicator of rational beliefs or fears. We will argue that the former case is determined by weighing the benefits the applications may have over the discomfort people feel, and that feelings can indicate serious inarticulate concerns people have.

**Key Words:** Bioethics, Unnatural, Feeling, Repulsion

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### Özet

Her nasılsa ahlakça şüphe uyandıran yapay şeylerin bio ve gen teknolojisinde tartışılmasının tekrar tekrar çoğaldığı görülmektedir. Sözde yapaylık tartışması, sadece “doğal” ın doğru anlamı tanımlandığında yararlıdır. Gen teknolojisinde “yapay”ın dikkate değer tanımı “yavan”dır. Eğer uygulama ya da uygulamanın son ürünü hatırı sayılır miktarda kişide yavanlık duygusunu akla getiriyorsa, o zaman ahlakça şüphe uyandırdığı tartışılabilir.

Bu makalede, ahlakça savunulabilir eylem olarak insanların duygularına saygı göstermek ile yavanlığın rasyonel inanışların ve korkuların göstergesi olabileceği görüşü arasında ayırım yapacağız. Uygulamaların yararları tartışılarak tanımlandığında, bahsedilen konunun insanların duygularını rahatsız edebileceğini ve bu duyguların insanların sahip olduğu ifade edilmemiş önemli kaygıları gösterebileceğini tartışacağız.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Biyoetik, Yapay, Duygu, Yavan

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In this contribution we would like to briefly analyze the view that if an application or product of biotechnology evokes feelings of repulsion then it may be morally questionable as well.

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. 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 C19 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 a bioethical context an interesting sense of 'unnatural' is 'repulsive'. A person may call a practice unnatural, meaning that in her view the practice is repulsive. Transgenic animals arouse feelings of disgust in many people. Interpreted this way, the *unnatural argument* is clearly worth of studying. Consider the following: It seems true that certain applications of genetic engineering are unnatural in the sense that many people consider them to be strongly repulsive. If many people consider certain applications of genetic engineering strongly repulsive, then these applications are morally problematic. Thus, certain applications of genetic engineering are morally problematic.

The argument is valid, since the conclusion follows from the premises. 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 judgement). 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? Here one can distinguish two different aspects of feelings of repulsion. First, there is repulsion as a negative feeling that should be avoided as such and, secondly, repulsion as an indicator of issues or actions which may be morally problematic in themselves.

The former aspect of repulsion says 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 a claim that would make the conclusion of the unnatural argument much stronger. It could be claimed that if many people consider certain applications of genetic engineering strongly repulsive, then these applications are morally wrong and applying them should be denied.

This, however, is hardly acceptable. From the mere feelings of repulsion, however valuable we may consider the absence of negative feelings, one cannot draw a moral or legal ban. There are people who find certain bold artworks repulsive. Some people find gay bars offensive and, perhaps, repulsive. 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 sex-

ual 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 respecting people's feelings 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.

The latter interpretation of repulsion is interesting and gives a somewhat different answer to the question whether things considered unnatural in the sense of being repulsive are morally questionable as well. Mary Midgley's answer to the question relies on the latter interpretation and 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, it is, therefore, important to find and evaluate the rationale behind these "gut feelings".*

When something is called unnatural in the sense of feeling disgusted by it, there may be several reasons for the repulsion. First, the reaction may be aesthetic, that is, the lifeform seen looks repulsive to the common eye. This is not a moral reaction but coincides with the previously mentioned aspect of repulsion as a negative feeling that should – to some extent – be respected as such. Second, one may react with feelings of disgust that indicate an understanding that the lifeform observed is, for example, suffering from pain or severe discomfort. An oncomouse with tumors is both aesthetically disturbing and, moreover, explicitly suffering. Here the feeling of repulsion can be as much the result of a rational evaluation of maltreatment as the result of aesthetic preferences.

A third, and definitely interesting, reason behind unnaturalness claims which appear as feelings of disgust, is neither aesthetic or maltreatment related. A transgenic tomato with an animal gene evokes feelings of repulsion in many people. The tomato itself looks delicious and healthy – it is the mere knowledge of the existence of a foreign gene makes one's stomach turn. This may be what Midgley has in mind when she claims that feelings may be indicators of rational thoughts and beliefs behind one's moral judgments. The beliefs that genes are somehow species specific – itself a contestable claim – and that species barriers cannot be crossed without serious consequences, are rational beliefs behind a mere gut feeling that a tomato with a fish gene is repulsive and somehow unnatural. Therefore, it appears as though feelings of repulsion should be taken into account as possible indicators of unarticulated beliefs.

We have argued that unnaturalness interpreted as repulsiveness is a meaningful and interesting claim in the context of bioethics. Moreover, feelings of disgust can be morally significant in two ways when evaluating certain applications and end-products of gene technology. First, they should be respected in themselves provided that the applications are not very valuable. Secondly, they may

act as indicators of rational beliefs and fears that can be found when the initial “gut feelings” are not hastily dismissed.

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