

"Dissecting Bioethics," edited by Tuija Takala and Matti Häyry, welcomes contributions on the conceptual and theoretical dimensions of bioethics. The section is dedicated to the idea that words defined by bioethicists and others should not be allowed to imprison people's actual concerns, emotions, and thoughts. Papers that expose the many meanings of a concept, describe the different readings of a moral doctrine, or provide an alternative angle to seemingly self-evident issues are therefore particularly appreciated. The themes covered in the section so far include dignity, naturalness, public interest, community, disability, autonomy, parity of reasoning, symbolic appeals, and toleration.

All submitted papers are peer reviewed. To submit a paper or to discuss a suitable topic, contact Tuija Takala at [tuija.takala@helsinki.fi](mailto:tuija.takala@helsinki.fi).

### *Making Sense of the Immorality of Unnaturalness*

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It is quite clear that science and technology are making inroads into parts of our lives that we might not have imagined. A claim that is often made against such inroads is that they are against nature or that they interfere with nature and that they are wrong because of this. It is quite easy to find examples. Historically, homosexuality, in vitro fertilization treatment, and the artificial insemination of animals have all been characterized in one way or another as unnatural or as violations of nature.<sup>1</sup> Today the prospect of human reproductive cloning, "designer children," or genetically modified crops draw similar claims.

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I thank Rob Sparrow for very helpful suggestions about the limits construal of interfering with nature claims. Our discussions played an important role in shaping this paper.

The intuition that lies behind these claims is extremely common and often quite strong. Michael Sandel has observed, "When science moves faster than moral understanding, as it does today, men and women struggle to articulate their unease."<sup>2</sup> The frequency and strength of the "unnaturalness" intuition may well be connected to this unease. Whether or not we think these intuitions ought to be respected in the end, we are all affected by them and, to some extent, have them. As Tuija Takala remarks, "Even those who come from a philosophical background can catch themselves thinking, 'That is unnatural!' and finding grounds for suspicion from the thought."<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, as things stand in the literature the "interfering with nature" issue is very one-sided. Many are of the view that claims of this kind are to

be quickly dismissed. Testa and Harris write:

People often claim that the natural is superior to the artificial or synthetic, they know that butter is natural and margarine artificial and that butter is better. People disposed to think in this way might claim that the fact that sexual reproduction is natural is morally relevant and makes it superior to artificial methods of reproduction and that we should give priority to the natural over the artificial. But this is simply absurd.<sup>4</sup>

In very many cases this kind of attitude is justified—those who make these claims often do very little that is worthwhile to expand, clarify, and support their view. Leon Kass, for example, writes:

There is wisdom in the mystery of nature that has joined the pleasure of sex, the inarticulate longing for union, the communication of the loving embrace and the deep-seated and only partly articulate desire for children in the very activity by which we continue the chain of human existence and participate in the renewal of human possibility. Whether or not we know it, the severing of procreation from sex, love and intimacy is inherently dehumanizing, no matter how good the product.<sup>5</sup>

However he fails to give any substantial account of why the severing is inherently dehumanizing or why the mystery of nature is wise and deserves respect.

In the face of claims like this, there are two reasons for trying to understand and make sense of interfering with nature claims. First, the intuitions that people have about the value of what is natural and the wrongness of certain kinds of interference are very widespread and in some cases very strong. And yet arguments given in defense of these intuitions seem either vague and grandiose

or fall away at the slightest pressure. My overall aim is to understand the problem in such a way as to preserve the intuition and so to see what can be said in favor of this often-dismissed claim.

The second reason is broader and more political. Much of the discussion of topics like the ethics of hybrid embryos or human reproductive cloning is marked by a sharp social conservative/liberal split. One side uses the rhetoric of dignity, respect for life, and human nature and the other freedom, liberty, and choice. Certainly at the political level the debate gets polarized very quickly. There are, however, ways of talking that are richer and more subtle than either of these two paradigms would seem to allow—the conceptual resources of moral language permit a much finer-grained analysis of the issues. In this context claims about the wrongness of interfering with nature are typically seen as easy targets for liberals and bedrock for conservatives. I am not sure that these claims can be easily turned away, but I am sure that more can be said in their defense.

In this paper I suggest a construal of interfering with nature claims that does not turn on an account of nature or its intrinsic value. Instead, I hold that we should understand the claim as one concerning the proper limits of human activity. That is, when someone claims that such and such is wrong because it interferes with nature, they are best understood as claiming that the action or practice in question oversteps the proper limits of human activity. This interpretation of the problem, I suggest, gives the claim sense and makes it worthy of discussion and consideration.

The paper progresses in three sections. After becoming a little clearer about the nature of the problem in the next section, the third section will consider a number of alternative understandings

of the interfering with nature claim that have been offered elsewhere. Not all of these approaches fail outright and I draw some lessons from their discussion. In the fourth section I develop the suggestion that we understand these claims to involve the supposed transgression of the limits of human activity.

### **Construing the Problem**

Before proceeding, it is important to be a little clearer about the claim that is at issue. In what follows I am concerned with claims of the following form: We ought not to do X because it would be interfering with nature, is against nature, or is unnatural. The way in which these claims occur in everyday discourse is quite varied and not always clear. Quite often, we might suppose, those making claims about interfering with nature have not thought about the best way to justify their claims or perhaps even that their claims need justifying.

Interfering with nature claims are to be distinguished from appeals to the so-called yuk factor because this is often more simply about a gut response. There is some overlap between cases, but in the main the yuk factor is more widely applicable and can sensibly be applied to a broader range of phenomenon. For instance, some art is most definitely designed to elicit this response, but this would not normally lead us to the claim of unnaturalness.

For Leon Kass, it appears that repugnance plays the role of a response similar to the yuk factor but with added moral significance. He writes:

In crucial cases . . . repugnance is the emotional expression of deep wisdom, beyond reason's power fully to articulate it. Can anyone really give an argument fully adequate to the horror which is father-daughter incest (even with consent)?<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of reasons, I see no grounds for aligning this or any other feeling of repugnance with wisdom. It may be that reason cannot capture the full power of the emotional response, but this represents the extent to which emotion and wisdom pull apart. I am confident that reason is more powerful and more subtle than Kass allows and that the project of attempting to articulate a justification of these responses is the surest way of avoiding the perils of prejudice.

These remarks connect with an important assumption about interfering with nature claims that underpins the discussion here. I assume that there is something to reconstruct and that these claims are not purely responses.<sup>7</sup> Interfering with nature claims are claims to truth that are to be justified rather than expressions of a felt emotion or response.<sup>8</sup> There may be a version of the yuk-factor response that accompanies claims of interfering with nature, but these will be accompaniments and do not warrant the same kind of treatment as the claims themselves. Indeed, this might be what is going on in the father-daughter incest case mentioned by Kass.

Interfering with nature claims should also be distinguished from claims about "playing God" but for different and more marginal reasons. Claims about playing God are more focused on the character of the agents involved, whether it is a particular clinician or a legislature enacting policy. The central concern here involves a claim that the agents in question are assuming a role or making decisions that are beyond their proper authority or "above their station." There are a few cases where we might think the playing God claim applies, but the nature-related ones do not (or do not as readily)—euthanasia and abortion cases are two examples. It makes sense to say that

the clinician who switches off a life-support machine is playing God but not that he is interfering with nature. In spite of this, for the most part the contexts of application of playing God and interfering with nature are quite close.

One final remark about the problem at hand: It seems wise to allow that a particular interfering with nature claim is a *prima facie* claim and not an absolute or all things considered one. By doing this we will better capture a range of views that are consistent with the specific intuition about interference without requiring that intuition prevails in all cases. So, for instance, someone may think that sex selection is *prima facie* wrong because it is interfering with nature but think that sex selection for sex-linked genetic disorders is justified. This is a case where the interfering with nature claim is defeasible and outweighed by, say, welfare considerations of some sort. Although interfering with nature claims are often presented as (and in many cases are) absolute claims, a defeasibilist position is certainly possible and, indeed, represents a more moderate position. Of course the *prima facie* wrongness of interfering with nature still needs to be demonstrated.

## Nature

### *Natural and Unnatural*

A tempting strategy, when faced with the task of making sense of an interfering with nature claim, is to examine what we mean by “nature.”<sup>9</sup> We might mean for example (i) the natural world, (ii) that part of the world that is not artifice, that is, not man-made, (iii) that part of the world that is not touched or affected by human beings, or (iv) the world as it would have been without humans. In each case we are confronted by two problems.

First, it is difficult to distinguish “natural” from “unnatural” in a way that matches, even vaguely, our intuitions about good and bad interferences with nature. Richard Norman deals with all of these attempts quite easily and generally. He writes: “The injunction not to interfere with nature, if understood in terms of the ‘natural’/‘human’ contrast, would rule out every human action.” On the other hand, “if we consider ourselves as a part of nature rather than as in contrast to nature, . . . the injunction to follow nature now excludes nothing at all.”<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that the distinction between “natural” and “human” or “nature” and “culture” is insignificant. Any reconstruction of interfering with nature claims will need to make room for the importance of these particular terms. The immediate problem here is seeing how the distinction can be used in the service of the moral objection carried by the claim.

Second, even if we can distinguish the natural from the unnatural in a coherent way, we will then confront the problem of why what is natural is good and what is unnatural is bad. As Testa and Harris put it:

In so far as the distinction can sensibly be drawn there is no reason to prefer the natural *per se*. If, for example “natural” foods are safer or healthier, there is a reason to prefer them. But in many cases, synthetic preparations are healthier and safer and indeed are preferred for good reasons. . . . The natural *per se* is morally neutral and although some people are naturally healthy and happy and that is good for them, it is equally natural to be unhealthy and unhappy.<sup>11</sup>

This is perhaps the key problem confronting those who would defend the claim that we ought not to interfere

with nature and it is the key problem in understanding such claims.

*"Is" and "Ought"*

One reason for thinking that this problem is intractable is Hume's famous "is/ought" distinction. On the face of it, this applies straightforwardly to the interfering with nature context. Statements about nature look to be clearly "is" statements—they tell us how the world is. The problem that Hume noticed is that normative conclusions ("ought" statements) do not follow from premises that are exhaustively descriptive ("is" statements). In the case at hand, it looks as though statements about nature are normatively inert, and such statements cannot be used to generate claims about what we ought to do. So, by themselves, statements about nature—"is" statements—cannot lead to conclusions about the wrongness (or rightness) of some acts—"ought" statements.

There are two strategies available in response to these points. First, without ascribing or building some normativity into nature we will not be in a position to move from claims about "interfering" with nature to claims about the wrongness of these acts.<sup>12</sup> But clearly those who would argue that we ought not to interfere with nature would quickly suggest that nature is not normatively inert. Second, arguments that seem to violate the "is/ought" rule do so because they have an implicit premise that needs to be made explicit. This amounts to providing a premise that connects the "is" to the "ought" and thus details the way in which nature is normatively loaded or has the capacity to affect what we ought to do. A premise of this sort might have the form "If X is the case then we ought to do Y." Of course all of the work is done

in the defence of the premise, spelling out why we ought to Y when X.

The explanation and development of the first strategy amounts to the second: Explaining the way in which nature is normatively loaded will, when done properly, amount to providing a premise connecting "is" to "ought." So, Hume's "is/ought" distinction does not provide us with anything more than a way of structuring the problem. The problem was to understand the way in which "nature" might be normatively loaded and the "is/ought" distinction simply reiterates this.

*"Fact" and "Value"*

Perhaps the more important distinction here is that between fact and value. Statements about nature look like statements of fact and these are to be distinguished from statements expressing values. This distinction is related to the "is/ought" distinction because we normally understand facts to be "is" statements and values to be "ought" statements. Again, if statements about nature are facts and facts are distinct from values, then arguments of the kind involving interfering with nature claims will always run close to the "is/ought" rule.

There are however numerous ways of undermining the distinction between fact and value. By examining the ways in which this distinction can break down we may be in a better position to understand the ways in which concepts like "nature" may be revealed to be value laden. Perhaps the main way in which the distinction can break down is through the various versions of moral objectivity. If we think that moral judgments are the kinds of things that are capable of being true or false, then moral judgments will likely count as facts.<sup>13</sup> There may remain a

distinction to be drawn between evaluative and descriptive facts.<sup>14</sup> One way of understanding this possibility is to think that “in some sense the empirical facts fix the moral facts.” That is, a particular action is wrong simply because it is the deliberate killing of an innocent person.<sup>15</sup> This option will not obviously help here, however. Much more work is needed to show which empirical facts affect the claim that interfering with nature is wrong.

A more promising route is via the idea of “thick concepts.” This is normally taken to be the idea that concepts like “courage” or “sensitivity” bring with them both a normative and a descriptive component. The user of these concepts is at once describing some feature of the world and making a value judgment about it. At a more general level, the thought is that the conceptual apparatus that we use and through which we depict the world is value laden. This does not mean that all concepts are to be thought of as “thick” but that the patterns of concept use work together with human responses to present the world already invested or loaded with value.<sup>16</sup> A good deal has been written about the idea of thick concepts, much of which is not directly relevant here. For us the key issue is whether there is an account of the concept of nature (and related concepts), like the one used in interfering with nature claims, which is “thick” in the relevant way. This is not simply the requirement that the concept of “nature” is thick but that the patterns and networks of concepts related to “nature” present the world as already invested with value. For example we might think that an adequate account of the concept of nature would make reference to and develop the distinction between culture and nature. Richard Norman gestures at this kind of thing when he points to “the

anthropological fact of the central place which the distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ occupies in the conceptual framework of any society.”<sup>17</sup>

The idea of “nature” and “culture” as opposing but complementary elements of a society’s conceptual and evaluative framework begins to take us away from the idea of nature as either the object of empirical science or the world of wilderness and wildlife. The distinction begins to look more like that between what is “given” and the merely conventional. This strategy opens up the possibility of the kind of evaluative account of the “natural” and “nature” that is required for a defence of the *prima facie* wrongness of interference.

#### Essence

There is another sense of the term “nature” that is often ignored in dismissals of interfering with nature claims (and underdeveloped in their assertion): the idea of “nature” as it occurs in “the nature of things.” This is the sense of nature that is tied to necessity and essential properties. It brings with it connections to the rich tradition of Natural Law theories of ethics.

The immediate difficulty with this approach is that the interventions at issue very often seem not to go against the nature of things. Phrases like “it’s in the nature of things” tend to apply where it could not be otherwise. Very clearly, cases involving preimplantation genetic diagnosis *are* possible and so are not ruled out by the “nature of things.” Again this approach seems to build too much that is normative into the way things must be.

However, the Natural Law and related traditions, particularly as instantiated by Aquinas and those following him, trade on an important connection between the natural law and human

nature that avoids this difficulty. Human nature is here understood to be normative in a strong sense. The thought is that whenever we act wrongly, we are acting against nature—in this case, human nature. So, doing what is right or acting from virtue is in accord with our natures whereas vice is against. Hume writes:

These [moral] sentiments are so rooted in our constitution and temper, that without entirely confounding the human mind by disease or madness, it is impossible to extirpate and destroy them.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of the British Moralists, this is arguably part of a continuing response to Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes was taken to have undermined the idea that goodness and virtue were consistent with human nature. After *Leviathan*, philosophers like Cudworth, Cumberland, Clarke, and Butler set about showing how wrong Hobbes was. They admittedly argued about whether our moral nature came in the form of a “moral sentiment” or was a consequence of rationality, but their arguments led to broadly the same conclusion: Right action and virtue are the fulfillment of human nature. As a case in point, Butler’s *Fifteen Sermons* were

intended to explain what is meant by the nature of man, when it is said that virtue consists in following and vice in deviating from it; and by explaining to show that the assertion is true.<sup>19</sup>

These heavily normative conceptions of nature provide an important connection to claims about the “natural order.” The natural order is not given simply by accounts of the natural world and the way it works (such as those given by science) but by the proper “constitution” of the various

parts. What matters is the *right* relationship between the elements.

This understanding of “nature” leads to an important shift in the “location” of the “wrongness” when we turn back to interfering with nature claims. Rather than interferences in nature being wrong because of what they are interferences “with,” they are wrong because they are acts that *we* ought not to do. The transgression comes from normative requirements that arise out of something about our natures rather than some feature of that toward which the act is “directed.” This is quite unsurprising. Interfering with nature claims are primarily deontological ones, so we should not be surprised if the moral requirement such claims insist upon can be derived, in the first instance, from features of the way in which agents ought to behave.

The lesson in all of this is to be wary of simplifying the concepts involved in interfering with nature claims too quickly. It is tempting to think of “nature” as opposed to “human.” It is also tempting to construct various ways of embedding value in the concept of “nature” so that we can find nature as valuable. I would suggest that neither of these strategies does justice to the intuitions in question. Instead a more promising line of investigation is to consider the network of concepts and forms of language that surround claims of unnaturalness in order to be clearer about the way normativity is involved. This kind of strategy can have important links to more sophisticated approaches to the relationship between fact and value. It can also draw on substantial traditions of thought in the history of moral philosophy dealing with the essential character of human behavior, natural law, and human nature. Central to this shift in emphasis is a move from considering interfering with nature

claims as involving “nature” understood as opposed to and distinct from human to “nature” as understood as “essence.”

### **Limits**

Let us now turn to the formulation of the interfering with nature claim that I introduced at the outset. My suggestion was that we would do well to understand the claims in question as claims that some important limit on human activity has been transgressed. In full, the suggestion was that a particular act or practice interferes with nature and so is wrong when it violates the proper limits of human activity.<sup>20</sup>

The initial measure of plausibility that this construal has stems partly from the fact that interfering with nature claims do seem to operate as constraints on our behavior in very much the same way as the “limits” construal implies. Also, this limits construal fits well with the sense of nature as essence and so links, in a not too direct way, with the reference to nature in the usual formulation.

In a similar vein, Norman points to a threshold paradox involved in the kinds of cases with which we are concerned.<sup>21</sup> We want, for example, our children to have the best chance in life and will do a substantial amount to achieve it. There is a point, however, at which we start to resist this—there are certain things that count as unnatural and so wrong to do in the pursuit of this goal. The threshold is the point at which we start to resist interventions. This resistance is paradoxical because there look to be cases where we are intent on achieving something and yet we decline to achieve it completely.<sup>22</sup> In discussing Norman’s account, Stephen Holland cites Elliot:

What tends to upset many of us about manufacturing decisions, I suspect, is not really that *some* of them might occur in ordinary choices about having a child, but that *too many* of them might be present. What might be objectionable, then, is the total quantity of the same sort of choice.<sup>23</sup>

This usefully captures the threshold idea. However, we should be somewhat wary of thinking that it is best taken as entirely or always a matter of quantity. There seems to be important space here for an account about “what it would be to do X” in addition to the thought that doing X counts as doing too many “Y”s.<sup>24</sup>

A significant part of the thought behind the “limits” construal comes from suggestions made by Norman about interfering with nature claims. We have already considered some of his claims about the way in which the concept of nature can be understood to function in society. A second important point that he makes is that “people can make meaningful choices only against a background of features of human life which are not themselves a matter of choice.”<sup>25</sup> These fixed, background features for a given set of choices represent the limits of the activity in question. The important step here is the recognition that the sense that particular choices can have is constrained in important ways by features of our lives and the world that are not optional in the same way. In this way, what we ought to do is limited by the ways in which we can make sense of our lives.

Stephen Holland provides a simple but effective example to illustrate Norman’s suggestions. The practice of trying to improve on one’s personal best time for running a mile is a perfectly coherent one, but it is one that makes sense in a context in which there are a fixed set of background conditions.



To see this, consider what one may do to improve one's time. It is perfectly reasonable to buy better, lighter running shoes and perhaps running spikes. Particular clothes or dietary changes will also likely help and will enable a better time. However, installing a moving track is not permissible: It undermines the point of the activity. The quest to improve on one's personal best time for running the mile simply does not make sense in this case. Installing a moving track is an example of changing a background condition: The fixed condition for the initial choice to pursue the goal is that the track is fixed and level.

More fully, all of our choices are made in a particular context that heavily determines the nature and content of the choice: what the choice is about, what it is a choice between, and what counts as success or achievement within the practice or enterprise in question. So, achievement and the choices surrounding achievement are best understood in the context of a fixed set of background conditions. When these background conditions are upset, choices already made (and their corresponding achievements) are undermined. Perhaps as importantly, the context of future choice and achievement is altered. Together these disruptions may have important ramifications for the sense that we make of our lives. As Holland puts it:

Norman's crucial thought is that what appears as an appeal to the argument from nature is in fact a covert appeal not to disturb the backdrop of given conditions necessary for our actions to have significance. When the runner says that they wouldn't take performance enhancing drugs because "they're unnatural," they are voicing resistance to a threat to constraints within which their actions can be achievements.<sup>26</sup>

There is much that is right about this story and, indeed, the limits construal I have offered is a variant of it. However, there are a number of points to make about the Norman/Holland version. First, Holland's account involves a tighter connection to facts about the natural world than I have been urging. He suggests that the background conditions of our choices "comprise facts made up of culturally specific glosses on scientific facts."<sup>27</sup> The implication of this is that if we did not have the gloss—that is, if we only relied on the scientific facts when making our choices—we would not be inclined to resort to interfering with nature claims. In my view, the background conditions are not simply facts with a cultural gloss, they are conditions that give sense to our activities and practices. To do the work required of them in Norman's story and so to feature in our choices (and the interfering with nature claims in the way suggested), the background conditions must present the world as already value laden: That striving for a personal best time is worthwhile is informed by background attitudes to competitiveness and personal achievement; that this form of activity is worthwhile is informed by our background attitudes to health and exercise.

Two things follow from this. First, interfering with nature claims do not simply arise because we do not have the most up-to-date scientific version of the facts as our background conditions—that is, because we are in some way mistaken about the facts. It is not as though those who object to homosexuality on the grounds that it is unnatural would be convinced of the error of this view when examples of homosexuality in nature are pointed out. Second, the background conditions are value laden so the term "nature" as it appears in the claim is not productively thought of as the object of

science but, as was suggested in the previous section, as something closer to “essence.”

The second important difference between the limits construal and Holland’s account concerns the extent to which it can constitute a defense of interfering with nature claims. Both Holland and Norman provide a rational reconstruction of interfering with nature claims. They show that it is reasonable to respond to the interventions in question with a claim of unnaturalness. The reasonableness of the claim, as we have seen, is tied to the significance of the activity in people’s lives. For both authors, the strength of the response derives from the significance of the relevant features of our lives: We ought to take note of (genuine) interfering with nature cases because they represent a particular kind of threat to deeply significant aspects of our lives. Holland further suggests that the arguments on either side need to be balanced: The benefits of the intervention need to be balanced against the extent to which we have the negative response. What is unclear in this is why the fact that a feature is significant in our lives or deeply connected to the meaning of our lives makes it more worth protecting or more worth caring about. If we are inclined to respect an individual’s autonomy, then we have a partial answer: We should weigh this significance against the benefits of the intervention in the relevant way. But the interfering with nature claim (like most interesting claims) tends not to be merely an expression of personal preference. As I have suggested, it is better understood as a claim about the limits of proper human activity.

Norman, in this respect, understates what he has achieved in giving the kind of account that he has of interfering with nature claims. His approach, when combined with the limits con-

strual opens up a range of strategic and methodological possibilities for the defense of interfering with nature claims. In the preceding, I hope to have suggested a number of ways of understanding these claims that, alongside Norman’s suggestions, can be productively used to account for the felt force of these claims. In particular, Norman’s picture brings into focus the way in which the concepts through which we view the world influence the nature of our choices. If we are to properly appreciate moral questions about our choices we must be clear about the ways in which these concepts affect the sense of these choices.

### Conclusions

There are a number of payoffs from this discussion. First, we are not entitled to dismiss claims about interfering with nature as nonsensical and as simply and only the basis of prejudice. Second, we might hold that the fact that some peoples’ lives are tied to these decisions in the way suggested by Norman and Holland means that we should accord them respect. People are entitled to value different activities and society should not interfere. In true liberal fashion, we should rebuke those who would interfere with the choices of others.

In terms of the continuing debate about these kinds of claims, I take the arguments above to have broadened the range of relevant considerations. The fact/value distinction is more relevant in this context than the distinction between “is” and “ought”: much of the work in recent metaethics that problematizes this distinction provides the relevant structure on which to base a richly normative account of nature. This is further enhanced by the recognition that there are various senses of “nature” that may not have been

sufficiently distinguished. Significant parts of the long tradition of moral philosophy have understood “essence,” rather than the physical world, to be the relevant sense of “nature” for these kinds of issues. Taken this way, worries about interfering with nature are more concerned with what counts as proper human behavior or on constraints on it. Finally, picking up a contrast suggestion by Norman, the distinction between nature and culture provides a starting point for thinking about the way in which our concepts and our conceptual framework do significant normative work in shaping the world. Each of these suggestions draws us to a different understanding of interfering with nature claims—as I have suggested—toward understanding these claims as claims about the proper limits of human activity.

My main aim has been to argue for an opening up of the question of the wrongness of interfering with nature. It is very tempting to assume the easiest construal of the problem or to then take the arguments that have been made to be all that can be said.<sup>28</sup> Thus, I would hope that thinking of interfering with nature claims as I have suggested shifts the terrain of the debate. Understanding claims about interfering with nature as claims about the proper limits of human activity restructures the form of the debate. Instead of being principally about how best to understand the normative force of nature such that interfering with it is wrong, the focus shifts to the ways in which humans ought to behave. This is a crucially important step because it blocks the simple dismissal of interfering with nature claims. Of course, it does not shift the attention away from those who make these claims: Much work is required to show that there are limits, how they are justified, and the ways in which

they apply to interfering with nature cases. But these are discussions that bring with them the weight of philosophical thought and tradition and are not so easily dismissed.

## Notes

1. See McMillan J. The return of the in-seminator: Euteleogenesis in recent and contemporary reproductive ethics. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 2007;38:393–410.
2. Sandel M. The case against perfection. *The Atlantic Monthly* 2004;293(3):51–62.
3. Takala T. The (Im)Morality of (Un)Naturalness. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2004; 13:15–9 at p. 15.
4. Testa G, Harris J. Ethics and synthetic gametes. *Bioethics* 2005;19(2):161. Testa and Harris do go on to say why they think it is absurd. We shall mention some of their moves below.
5. Kass L. The wisdom of repugnance. *The New Republic* 1997:22.
6. See note 5, Kass 1997:20.
7. I am here using “response” in a way that distinguishes it from “judgment.”
8. There is nothing here intended to contravene a noncognitivist approach. Insofar as a noncognitivist position can reconstruct substantive moral argument, it will also reconstruct this distinction—say between responses that are susceptible of argument and those that are not.
9. Mill JS. On nature. Lancaster E-text, prepared by the Philosophy Department at Lancaster University, from *Nature, The Utility of Religion and Theism*. London: Rationalist Press; 1904, available at [http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/philosophy/texts/mill\\_on.htm](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/philosophy/texts/mill_on.htm) (last accessed 18 March 2008).
10. Norman R. Interfering with nature. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1996;13(1):1–11 at p. 2.
11. See note 4, Testa, Harris 2005:161–2.
12. See note 3, Takala 2004:16.
13. That is, on the plausible assumption that a (the) defining feature of a fact is its truth aptness.
14. Wiggins D. *Needs, Value, Truth* (3rd ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1998:95.
15. Garrard E, Wilkinson S. Mind the gap. In Häyry M, Takala T, Herrison-Kelly P, eds. *Bioethics and Social Reality*. New York: Rodopi; 2005:77–91 at p. 79.
16. See McDowell J. Are moral requirements hypothetical imperatives? *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (Supp. Vol. 52) 1978:13–29.

- Reprinted in McDowell J. *Mind, Value and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1998:77–94.
17. See note 10, Norman 1996:3.
  18. Hume D. A treatise of human nature [1739]. In: Raphael DD, ed. *British Moralists 1650–1800*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett; 1991:510.
  19. Butler J. *Fifteen Sermons and a Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue* [1726], Matthews WR, ed. London: Bell and Sons; 1958:7 (p. 13, original pagination).
  20. It is important here to clearly distinguish human activity from human nature. What constitutes proper human activity is likely to be importantly informed by human nature, and one way of developing an account of the former is through a rich account of the latter. I take it that the sense of human nature discussed by the British Moralists and in the Natural Law tradition is more about human activity or behavior than the necessary properties of human beings. To put it starkly, this sense of human nature concerns our “moral constitution,” as Butler might have put it, not our genetic composition. Having said this, the nature of human nature is far from being a simple matter but is beyond the scope of this paper.
  21. See also Holland S. *Bioethics: A Philosophical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press; 2003:154–7.
  22. This differs somewhat from Holland’s account of the paradox. His version has it that it is paradoxical to decline to achieve a goal completely because we are so intent on it. But it does not seem to be the intensity of our intent that causes us to decline the full realization. Instead, the paradox (or the contradiction) is both to desire the goal (i.e., to avoid dying) and not desire the goal (i.e., being immortal): We are clearly very intent on achieving the goal and yet we decline to achieve it completely (see note 21, Holland 2003:154).
  23. See note 21, Holland 2003:186. He cites Elliot D. Uniqueness, Individuality and Human Cloning. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1998;15(3): 217–30.
  24. We might also object that when the term “manufacturing” becomes appropriate for the kind of decisions we are making, we have crossed an important threshold.
  25. See note 10, Norman 1996:3.
  26. See note 21, Holland 2003:156.
  27. See note 21, Holland 2003:155.
  28. In a different but not unrelated context David Wiggins writes: “And the long and the short of it is that, in this way, without paying a penny of its own into court or even exerting itself, philosophy can all too easily finish up . . . failing to support the side of the argument that might have expected its assistance.” Wiggins D. Nature, respect for nature, and the human scale of values. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 2000;100:7.