

# Office Hours: Enhancement

Hello Bioethicists!! I have to say that it has been so exciting to follow your conversations on the Discussion Board and Reddit. And by the way, can we just give a shout out to Antarctica and those of you on Atoll Islands? One of the things that has been so inspiring to us on Team MOOC is seeing the connections across oceans and continents—oh, and age groups. We have high schoolers and nonagenarians (a word I just looked up to capture my wonderful 90-year old dad, who is taking this MOOC with his church study group).

OK, down to the questions.

»»» This week many of you condemned some practice or other by appealing to the idea of it being **unnatural**, or **playing God**, or going against the **wisdom of nature**.

So... these terms are important, but also deserve pause. Sometimes a lot can get hidden in them.

»»» Is what's natural good? Is what's unnatural bad?

Let's first be clear: what is **natural** is not always good. It's "natural" for humans to get cancer, to confront tsunamis. One way of understanding what is "natural" is to simply say that it is part of "nature"—the non-human world, and that obviously contains lots of bad as well as good. More technically put, that something is "natural" is to talk about how things *are*, which philosophers are quick to point out does not entail anything about what *should be*.

This is commonly known as the '**is-ought**' gap: just because something *is* some way doesn't mean that it *ought* to be that way. Wild animals sometimes eat their young; bacteria can lead to serious illness in humans. But none of these things are clearly *good*. We tend to think that antibiotics, which prevent the bacteria from making us sick, are good. So it looks like some things that *interfere* with nature—that are *unnatural*—are still worth choosing. Sometimes what is *unnatural* can be *good* for us.

So **is** doesn't imply **ought**, and **natural** doesn't mean **good** (as one of you astutely noted on Reddit!). Pointing out that radical enhancement is *unnatural* is not enough, on its own, to prove that

is is *bad* or something to be avoided.

### »»» What's wrong with **playing God**? Why should we heed the **wisdom of nature**?

Perhaps the thought is that some kinds of enhancement are wrong because they amount to **playing God**, or it dangerously fails to heed the **wisdom of nature**.

Do these versions of the objection fare better?

Well, first: if these expressions are different ways of worrying that the unnatural is wrong, we've already seen that doesn't work.

So... perhaps the objections are expressing a different thought. Perhaps, in worrying about meddling in the plans of either God or nature, one is actually expressing a concern about **humility**. That is: perhaps the concern is that one ought not to be so arrogant as to presume to know better than God or nature how things ought to be.

There are at least two different ways to think about this worry.

### »»» Humility as **precaution**.

First, a concern with humility might have to do with *unintended consequences* and *the limits on our knowledge* when messing with the nature.

This concern is definitely worth taking seriously. In fact, it has a quite respectable position in policy discussions, under the head of **precautionary reasoning**, or the **precautionary principle**.

Precautionary reasoning warns about underestimating the seriousness of risks, or exhibiting hubris (the pride that brought down Greek heroes). Those who lean towards precaution would warn us against the mistake of thinking that we can accurately predict all of the consequences, and warn us that some of those unintended consequences may be too severe to risk.

So far, so good. But. The problem is that such reasoning could prevent all technological advancement. Had we adopted precautionary reason, would we have developed vaccines? What about the internet? The well-known challenge to precautionary reasoning is that, just as it warns us against taking the risks too lightly, we can't always reason by taking the *benefits* too lightly.

Sometimes great benefits are worth serious risks. So, once again, we can't just say "don't play God"—we have to assess the individual issue more specifically.

## »»» Humility as **virtue**.

There is another way of thinking about the worry—and that's by concentrating on humility as a **virtue**.

In a [popular article](#) (followed by [a book of the same name](#)), philosopher Michael Sandel has argued that our attempts at certain kinds of enhancement manifest a kind of moral failure to accept what is given and *begrateful* with it. If enhancement represents a "pursuit of perfection" or a *bid for mastery and dominion* over our own lives and those of others, Sandel argues, it manifests a kind of **defect of character**. What's wrong with some kind of radical enhancements, on this view, is that they involve a special sort of moral failure.

So, for instance, many people feel there is something wrong with the attitude parents display when they aim at creating "designer children" whose traits and characteristics are carefully selected down to the tiniest detail possible with current technology. After all, parents ought to love their children for the people they are and become, not for matching some pre-existing ideal dreamed up by the parents before the child's birth (or conception!). Maybe, the thought goes, we ought to love ourselves in just the same way: and this kind of love and openness to *what is* requires that we humbly relinquish our power to alter it.

Again, so far, so good. But. This viewpoint runs into similar issues as the precaution-based variant. Surely the virtue of **acceptance**, if it truly is a virtue, leaves some space for change! I can love myself without loving my migraines or my myopia; I can love the world I live in while believing we should filter water before drinking it; I can love my children while still vaccinating them against common childhood diseases. So, accepting what is "given" with an attitude of gratitude is a good thing in some cases—but not in all. And so as an analysis of what lies behind the claim that enhancement (radical or otherwise) is morally problematic because it amounts to **playing God** or not accepting **nature's wisdom**, it can have, at best, limited application.

So. No answers, but a conviction that staying patient and curious can help us dig deeper. Thanks again for your wonderful questions and inspiring discussions!

Maggie