

Common arguments: One

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There are some arguments...

... that are used time and time again...

... against advances in science...

...especially biotechnology

1. It's not *natural*!

2. It's *disgusting*!

3. It's *too risky*!

4. It's a *matter of opinion*!

In this podcast we'll look at 'it's unnatural' and 'it's disgusting'

We'll look at 'it's too risky' and 'it's a matter of opinion' in two separate podcasts

It's not natural

Louise Brown, born in 1978, was the first ever 'test-tube' baby

Many people were worried because test-tube babies seemed unnatural

James Watson and Max Perutz, both Nobel prize winners, expressed fears of ‘deformed babies who might be the victims of infanticide’

Many obstetricians wondered who would care for the babies if this ‘experiment with nature’ went disastrously wrong

American bioethicist, Jeremy Rifkin, was concerned about babies growing up as ‘specimens, sheltered not by a warm womb, but by steel and glass’.

We all know the punchline of this story...

....thousands of test-tube babies have since been born...

...with no greater chance of defect than in ordinary births...

....so even if test-tub babies *are* somehow unnatural...

...this doesn't suggest there is anything wrong with them

But many people believe that something's being unnatural...

...is a black mark against it

But what is it for something to be unnatural?

And why is being unnatural a bad thing?

Possible meanings for 'unnatural':

- **violates the laws of nature**
- **artificial**
- **manmade**

To read 'unnatural' as 'violates the laws of nature'...

...ensures that the 'it's not natural' worry becomes the 'its too risky' worry...

...and anyway we *cannot* violate the laws of nature

To read 'unnatural' as 'artificial' doesn't obviously generate a problem:

- artificial roses might be made of real silk**
- artificial intelligence is real intelligence**

Perhaps therefore we should read 'it's not natural'...

...as 'it is man-made' or at least 'it is influenced by man'?

But why is being man-made or influenced by man enough to make something bad or immoral?

It is true that many philosophers believe that only human beings can be immoral...

....but by the same token only human beings can be *moral*...

...so it cannot be *this* that makes man-made things bad

**There are plenty of things made by man
that do not seem at all immoral or bad:**

- **anaesthetic**
- **vaccinations**
- **email**

**And there are plenty of things *not* made
by man that *are* bad:**

- **earthquakes**
- **disease**
- **cannibalism**

**Being man-made seems neither
necessary nor sufficient for being bad**

So when you hear that it is unnatural and therefore bad:

- **for women to have babies after the menopause**
- **to engage in genetic engineering**
- **to create life-forms that don't exist in nature**
- **to transplant pig-organs into human beings**

you know now to be sceptical; these things *might* be bad, but probably not because they are unnatural

It's disgusting!

Intuition plays a large role in our decisions about whether something is or isn't morally acceptable.

Sometimes people think that if we *feel* something is wrong, then it must *be* wrong.

American ethicists, Leon Kass and Alton Charles, have argued in this tradition.

In their contribution to the findings of an ethics committee on cloning set up by President Clinton they argued against making recommendations on the basis of reason and logic.

They argued that emotional responses are more important when we are discussing ethical questions in the context of politics.

Their ‘Yuk!’ theory of morality tells us that....

...if something is disgusting then it is wrong.

To adopt this theory is to think that if you find it disgusting to think about:

- **transplanting pig organs into human beings**
- **eating meat that has been created in a laboratory**
- **use eggs from aborted foetuses for IVF**

then you should also think of it as immoral

But consider reading, in a tourist guide, that you shouldn't take photographs of certain people because they believe that in recreating their image you are stealing their soul.

Most people would considerately refrain from taking photographs.

But this doesn't mean they should accept that in taking photographs they are stealing the soul of those they photograph.

Most of us would believe that the fears of these people are based on ignorance.

This is the problem with intuitions: they are often grounded on ignorance.

It is understandable for people to recoil from things they know nothing about.

But such intuitive recoils are not well-grounded.

The only way to discover whether our intuitive fears *are* well-grounded is subject them to rational scrutiny.

To ‘subject our intuitions to rational scrutiny’ is to try to pin them down.

We need to be able to recognise an intuition, find out *why* we hold it (if we can), and then ask ourselves whether our reason for holding it is, or isn’t, a good one.

Often, when we try to pin down an intuition we will find we can back it up with good reasons.

But now we have an *argument* for whatever it is we were saying, we are not relying simply on our intuitions.

On other occasions we will find ourselves unable to pin down our intuitions.

Sometimes this will mean that our intuitions dissolve: we will see that they had no real grounding at all.

On other occasions we will be left with the disturbing feeling that something is wrong (or right), though we remain unable, despite our best efforts, to say why it is wrong (or right).

In such a situation the rational thing to do is to keep an open mind, to keep trying to pin our intuitions down, and to listen hard to those who believe themselves to have arguments, both for and against.

So if you find yourself, on hearing of a scientific innovation, thinking ‘that’s disgusting...

...do not be tempted immediately to infer that it is immoral...

...it might *be* immoral, but almost certainly not because it is disgusting

In the next two podcasts we shall consider the arguments ‘it’s too risky’ and ‘it’s all a matter of opinion’

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