

The Yuck Factor

Charles Fethe on the Wisdom of Repugnance.

I am not sure whether two thousand years of philosophical discussion about ethics has contributed much to the moral improvement of civilization, but I believe thoughtful people should at least give the philosophers credit for introducing some intriguing additions to the ethical lexicon. When your moral debates start drifting toward vituperation, *ad hominem* slurs and banal quotes from the Bible, you might be able to score some intellectual points and raise the level of the argument by borrowing from the philosophical vocabulary. Throw in a few references to Stoic virtues, hedonistic fallacies, utilitarian rationality, or that Teutonic trump, the Categorical Imperative, in all its versions. If these terms do nothing else, they will at least give your audience an opportunity to pause for reflection.

Unfortunately, lexicographical innovation in philosophical discourse about ethics has diminished over the years. With the death of Jeremy Bentham in 1832, the ever-popular theory of utilitarianism lost its greatest word master. No longer do we have the likes of the Panopticon or the Pannomial Fragments to startle our minds into deeper thought when we take on the inevitable task of weighing life's pleasures and pains. German philosophy used to be a fairly healthy producer of intriguing terminology. Coming out of the Kantian tradition and supported by a language which seems able to endow even the simplest words with a profound metaphysical aura, philosophers like Husserl and Heidegger have been able to produce a veritable light-show of philosophical concepts, astounding the audience with flashes of darkness and radiance. Many curious readers have spent pleasurable hours pondering over the question of what it means to be *echt* or looking at their pencils and wondering about *Die Frage nach dem Ding*. But, perhaps as a result of World War II, German philosophy has joined the trend toward a more lifeless and mundane discourse. It seems that only the academics are still bothered about the difference between *Sein* and *Dasein*.

This dearth of new and stimulating philosophical terms has forced philosophers to seek out moral concepts in strange places. To their credit, many philosophers have courageously stepped out of the confines of intellectual institutions and taken to the streets, where moral dispute still has a vital energy to it. The philosophers have gone 'down and dirty', into the muck and mire of low-life and teenage thought, and they have come up with what might turn out to be a lexicographical pearl. They've found "yuck."

"Yuck" (or "yuk") has been around for some time. The *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* notes that it appeared as an American slang term early in the 1940's and was used pejoratively to describe someone as a fool. But by the 1960's, it took on a different meaning. It became associated

with revulsion and disgust. The *Supplement* offers an example which nicely illustrates the later use of the term: "Rotting woggles of chilly yuck which once were apples and pears." The word also acquired a forceful expressive function, as in this sentence from a 1983 novel: "It was the way he talked about her... 'You know what older women are, wink, wink.'.. Yuk!" Perhaps the clearest sign that "yuck" was gaining a measure of respectability was the transformation of the single word into a term now often used by academics and culture critics: "the yuck factor."

It was in the 1990's that the philosophers really began to notice how yucky things have become. Those who found the term most appealing were the ethicists, beginning with Professor Arthur Caplan of the University of Pennsylvania, and the word now appears regularly at bioethical conferences, sometimes used in a serious way and sometimes as a joke. At a recent public lecture given at Rutgers University by the controversial Professor Peter Singer, almost all of those who opposed his very liberal and consequentialist ethical views about cloning cited "the yuck factor" to bolster their objections. Indeed, the term now seems to be adopted as a standard means of expressing conservative discontent at traditional utilitarian positions on many bioethical issues. Wesley Smith, in a recent issue of the *New Statesman* (April 2000), even suggested that since academic bioethicists as a group were so ideologically committed to utilitarian thinking, the only way to isolate them and weaken their influence would be to unite the opposition around the feeling that biological advances were becoming just too yucky to be accepted by people of common sense. So "the yuck factor" seems to be finding an audience.

That philosophers and other academics would employ 'yuck' in discussing serious issues is a rather surprising turn of linguistic events. After all, the word 'yuck' carries heavy baggage when it enters the realm of refined, philosophical discussion: it is not derived from Latin or Greek, it is part of the vocabulary of people under fifteen years of age, and it sounds very much like a number of other monosyllabic words which are not mentioned in polite company. What was it, then, that gave 'yuck' sufficient respectability to enter the realm of academic conferences and professional journals?

Perhaps we can answer this question if first we think a bit about how 'yuck' is used. The meaning of 'yuck' is not rigidly determined, but I think most people would agree with at least a few of the following distinctions. Adultery is wrong, but it is not yucky. Marrying someone thirty years older than you may or may not be wrong, but those who disapprove would certainly find it a yucky thing to do. Stealing food is not yucky, but eating worms and cockroaches is. Giving birth is sometimes yucky, men giving birth would always be yucky.

Making a robot dog is not yucky, adding a second head to a real dog is yucky. It is not easy to define or delimit yuckiness, but the sure sign that yuck is in the offing is that we are dealing with some kind of strange situation that only living, biological creatures are involved in.

This point helps us to understand why philosophers have recently shown such interest in yuck. For among all the current moral controversies which philosophers are examining, none seems as important as the issues raised by recent advances in the biological sciences. With the cloning of Dolly the sheep in 1995 and the recent successes in mapping the human genome, the biological future of the planet has now become open to radical changes which no human had ever witnessed before. Some of the examples I mentioned in the previous paragraph – males giving birth, dogs with two heads – are not impossible fancies of the imagination: they could become realities.

To some people, primarily those with liberal utilitarian leanings, the biological possibilities offered by scientific advances are viewed as part of a brave new world in which human beings would be able to correct the defects of nature and mold their environment and their progeny according to their own standards. To people who follow a more conservative way of thinking, such a future would give us just more yuck.

The philosophers' use of the word 'yuck' is, of course, something of an attention-grabber. It is an expressive term designed to shock the audience and make clear the speaker's revulsion. And like most attention-grabbers, its shock value probably will not last for long. But although the word may lose its forcefulness, the fundamental sense of repugnance which the term expresses will not go away. Indeed, this moral feeling will undoubtedly become more prevalent as we witness the strange and marvellous living beings which the biological sciences are sure to place upon the stage within the next few decades. So it is important that we think carefully and philosophically about this feeling of revulsion and consider what role it might play in the serious moral judgments which science and technology are now forcing on us.

Of all the events which have elicited the response of repugnance among conservative critics perhaps none has attracted as much attention as the cloning of Dolly. Everyone agrees, of course, that Dolly is a very pretty sheep. But what makes people fear Dolly is that she may be the harbinger for a world of very peculiar beings indeed. The new technology could offer the power to give us mass-produced clones, mother-daughter or father-son clones, clones of long-lost relatives, clones created to replace a dead child. The possibilities are endless. If we add the power to alter the genetic structure of what we produce and design our progeny as we choose, perhaps with an added assortment of genetic components from elsewhere in the animal kingdom, the results would



undoubtedly elicit even more revulsion. Something frightening is happening here. The challenge for philosophers who make use of "the yuck factor" is to explain this feeling of repugnance and provide it with some kind of stable philosophical credibility. An excellent example of a philosophical attempt to deal with this problem and give repugnance an established place in ethical thought can be found in Leon Kass's article 'The Wisdom of Repugnance: Why We Should Ban the Cloning of Humans', published in *The New Republic* in 1997 and widely reproduced in ethics textbooks. Kass recognizes that he, and others who give serious weight to our sense of revulsion, must deal with one serious objection to their position, and that is the belief that the feeling of repugnance may be no more than a gut reaction, a gag reflex, and not something that should be used to replace rational thinking about what to approve and what to disapprove.

There are, of course, some philosophers who would have no problem in giving full ethical credentials to gut emotional reactions. These philosophers adopt what has been called the Boo-Hurrah theory of ethics (recently discussed in Bob Harrison's article 'Are There Any Moral Facts?' in the April/May 2000 issue of *Philosophy Now*). They believe that all ethical terms are nothing more than emotional expressions of personal approval or disapproval. Such philosophers would certainly welcome "yuck" (or "Yuck!") into the vocabulary of moral discourse, since it is an expressive term *par excellence*. One can hardly utter it without an accompanying facial distortion.

But the Boo-Hurrah theory faces serious philosophical difficulties, and Kass does not think that a sense of revulsion is simply a personal feeling. He has a different way to deal with the claim that repugnance is not part of rational thinking about ethics. Here is his answer to the challenge about the seeming irrationality of revulsion:

Revulsion is not an argument; and some of yesterday's repugnances are today calmly accepted – though, one must add, not always for the better. In crucial cases, however, 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), or eating human flesh, or even (just!) raping or murdering another human being? Would anybody's failure to give full rational justification for his or her revulsion at these practices make that revulsion ethically suspect? Not at all.

"Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder," Kass warns us. True enough. But even if we accept revulsion as a legitimate playing card in the game of moral discourse, we certainly need not agree that the card is always trump or that it is exempt from the rules of the game. The yuck factor is, after

all, just a factor, one element in the process of moral deliberation. We are entitled to some guidelines on how to use it.

One rule or guideline we need to have is a statement telling us when it is appropriate to play this card and when it is not. There are serious problems in determining this rule. Consider race relations, for example. Not long ago, interracial marriage was widely viewed as a repugnant violation of the natural order. Those who violated this taboo were made to pay the price. Surely Kass would not endorse such a judgment, no matter how strong the sense of moral outrage in which it clothed itself. In the passage quoted, Kass recognizes that some changes in the sense of revulsion have been for the better, and some have not. But how do we determine when this change should occur? What legitimates certain attitudes of revulsion and disqualifies others?

Some defenders of the ethical status of our sense of repugnance try to provide a guide for its use by relating it to a kind of ugliness. To them, virtue has a special beauty, and repugnant things are morally ugly. But this seems only to take us out of the frying pan and into the fire. The rules for determining what is beautiful or ugly are even more uncertain than the rules for moral judgments. If we cannot find accepted rules for recognizing aesthetic ugliness, we will certainly be unlikely to make progress in recognizing moral ugliness.

Another popular way to justify repugnance is to identify the repugnant with the unnatural. What is wrong with human cloning, on this view, is that it violates some kind of natural law or natural order of things, and this violation instinctively provokes revulsion. But this view also faces serious problems. In his classic essay 'On Nature', John Stuart Mill brilliantly delineated the numerous obstacles one would face in trying to use the natural/unnatural distinction as a justification for moral judgments. This distinction surely does not solve the problem of emotional relativism, as Mill shows in this charming example:

Let us next consider a quality which forms the most visible and one of the most radical of the moral distinctions between human beings and most of the lower animals; that of which the absence, more than of anything else, renders men bestial – the quality of cleanliness. Can anything be more entirely artificial? Children, and the lower classes of most countries, seem to be actually fond of dirt. The vast majority of the human race are indifferent to it: whole nations of otherwise civilised and cultivated human beings tolerate it in some of its worst forms, and only a very small minority are consistently offended by it. Indeed, the universal law of the subject appears to be that uncleanness offends only those to whom it is unfamiliar, so that those who have lived in so artificial a state as to be unused to it in any form are the sole persons whom it disgusts in all forms. Of all virtues this is the most evidently not instinctive, but a triumph over instinct. Assuredly neither cleanliness nor the love of cleanliness is natural to man, but only the capacity of acquiring a love of cleanliness.

It is easy to find numerous examples where the sense of disgust and violation has changed over the course of time or differs from one society to another. I doubt that any defender of what Kass calls "the wisdom of repugnance" could formulate a general rule for explaining why the sense of repugnance arises and why it sometimes changes. But in the normal course of moral deliberation and discussion such a rule is not always needed. Sometimes we can reach conclusions simply by looking carefully at particular examples and seeing if we agree

that there is something repugnant about them. So even if we can't formulate a general rule for determining what is and is not repugnant, we might still make a convincing case that at least *this particular* kind of thing is surely disgusting. This is the approach Kass follows in his discussion of cloning.

Kass points out a number of features in human cloning which he believes justify the judgment that it is morally wrong. Some of his arguments are based on standard moral theories such as utilitarianism, as when he notes the serious psychological and social consequences cloning might have on family life. But the main argument he gives to show the 'perversities' of cloning is based on the conviction that human cloning is dehumanizing: it turns natural procreation into manufacturing and children into commodities. The clone is pre-planned, made-to-order, and so its makers – not just a parent-donor but the whole technological team involved in the process – have it at their mercy. "Cloning is inherently despotic," says Kass, "for it seeks to make one's children (or someone else's children) after one's own image (or an image of one's choosing) and their future according to one's will."

This argument has deep philosophical and religious roots. We can find something like it in the prohibitions of the Hebrew prophets and in the ominous fears of ancient Greek tragedians. It warns us about hubris, about pride and power, about the over-confidence which seems endemic in creatures who are also creators. In its modern form, the form which Kass adopts, the argument derives strength and clarity by basing its convictions not on divine command or mythical taboos but on the transformations which occur when technology replaces nature. Manufactured humans, Kass tells us, are not like those natural-born humans who devised and created them: they are planned products, not gifts and not surprises. They thus 'belong' to their creators in a very strange way. And it is this which makes some people view their creation with disgust: it seems inhuman.

What are we to make of this kind of moral thinking? Many philosophers have suggested that it will vanish as the benefits of the new biological technologies become more apparent. As Dr David Mangus noted at the recent MIT-Harvard Conference on Genetics, "As soon as there's a feel-good story about an infertile couple...a bouncing baby that happens to be a clone, the yuck factor loses presence."

Mangus may be correct in his prediction. Science has no built-in ethics. The only moral checks which seem to have power to influence scientific advances seem to be utilitarian arguments: Who benefits? Who gets hurt? But I think we would be losing an important moral receptor if we became so enlightened, so devoted to utilitarian calculation, that we ignore the sense of natural outrage and disgust altogether. Perhaps the challenge we face today is the same as that which Aeschylus portrayed in *The Eumenides*. In that play, the ancient Furies represented the wisdom of repugnance, the ethics of blood ties and a natural order. But a newer, more rational ethical code was developing in Athens at that time, and it was Athena herself who acknowledged the importance of the ancient wisdom and found a place for the Furies in the new way of thinking about right and wrong. Her task is ours.

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Charles Fethe is a professor of philosophy and bioethics at Kean University of New Jersey. He has published in the fields of aesthetics, religion, education and criminal justice.