

COMMENTARY/

MORALS, ETHICS, AND BIOTECHNOLOGY

By Bernard Dixon

“Careless talk costs lives,” the British government used to warn the people during World War II.

Rarely are such terminal sequelae associated with loose talk in more peaceable times. Yet the consequences of wooliness can still be far-reaching—as in public discourse on the alleged problems generated by biotechnology. I’ve had at least two conversations in recent times with gloomy souls who were consumed with worry over what they described as the moral and ethical implications of biotechnology and genetic manipulation, and were trying to foster similar apprehensions in others. Yet in each case, patient questioning showed that their anxieties, once defined, had nothing to do with morals or ethics at all. Their real difficulties were over matters of safety, risk, uncertainty, and the commercial imperative.

These are understandable concerns. But their existence in no way supports their metamorphosis into the proposition that biotechnology generates its own characteristic moral and ethical dilemmas. It would, I suggest, be beneficial all round if the critics of bioindustry were to speak with greater precision on these topics. Any well-trained Jesuit or Marxist (if there are any left) could help them to characterise their fears with the necessary clarity.

Roger Straughan is not, as far as I know, a follower of either St. Ignatius Loyola or Karl Marx. He is simply a clear-thinking academic who two years ago produced an excellent discussion paper on genetic manipulation for the National Consumer Council in the U.K. It was an unlikely document to come from Reading University’s Department of Arts and Humanities in Education, but a cogent and influential one nevertheless. Now Straughan has written a further report, entitled *Ethics, Morality and Crop Biotechnology*, which I would love to have had in my briefcase while listening to those confusions of safety and morals. Old-fashioned cynics may dismiss this report because it was commissioned by ICI Seeds (Fernhurst, U.K.). In fact, the company has not restrained or influenced the author in any way. Moreover, rather than penning a prescriptive document, Straughan has simply dissected, with elegance and economy, strands of argument often intermixed to the point of meaninglessness.

Thus the notion of morality—that certain things are right or wrong—should not be used interchangeably with the narrower concept of ethics—a set of standards by which a community decides to regulate its behaviour, so as to distinguish what is legitimate in the pursuit of particular aims from that which is not legitimate. More technically, ethics can also refer to moral philosophy. Straughan argues that this distinction “shows how essential it is to ‘unpack’ the apparently straightforward statement that biotechnology is a source of moral and ethical concern; for to call something a moral concern does not necessarily mean that it is of much ethical significance.”

Similarly, statements that biotechnology is intrinsically wrong need to be disentangled from claims that it is

extrinsically wrong because of its consequences. This distinction, which can help to identify the precise grounds of an otherwise diffuse worry, leads Straughan to consider two intrinsic concerns—that biotechnology is unnatural and that it is disrespectful to living things. Analysis of two sub-themes of the former (What is meant by natural? And what is good about being natural?) yields the verdict that allegations about the unnaturalness of biotechnology have little ethical content, because they rest on unclear language and unsound reasoning. Cogent analysis of the latter prompts the conclusion that a biotechnologist shows no less respect for the biosphere than does the person who thwarts the unrestricted growth of grass by mowing the turf of a bowling green.

Roger Straughan brings similarly cool reasoning to bear upon extrinsic concerns about the consequences of biotechnology—not the least in insisting that riskiness *per se* is not a moral or ethical matter. “It is more risky to drive on motorways on wet Friday evenings than on fine Sunday mornings, but this is a statistical fact rather than a moral issue,” he writes. “Some activities are inevitably more risky than others, though none can be totally risk-free, and it does not follow that low-risk activities (for example, snoozing in front of the television) are morally superior to high-risk ones (for example, rescuing children trapped in burning buildings).”

On patenting, Straughan rehearses the moral points to be made on both sides of the argument. Most telling is a quote he has unearthed from plant breeder Luther Burbank in the 1920s, *before* such protection was available in the U.S.: “A man can patent a mousetrap or copyright a nasty song, but if he gives the world a new fruit that will add millions to the value of the Earth’s annual harvest, he will be fortunate if he is rewarded by so much as having his name connected with the result . . . I would hesitate to advise a young man . . . to adopt plant breeding until [Congress] takes some action to protect his unquestioned right to some benefit from his achievements.”

As for the assertion that genetic resources, as the “common heritage of mankind,” should be free for all to use, Straughan points out that very few components of nature are actually “free” in the sense that wild berries are available for picking. “There might be oil beneath the waters of Loch Lomond, but I am not ‘free’ to set up my drilling rig there to extract it. Even if I were, the operation would be far from ‘free’ in terms of financial commitment.”

I can strongly recommend this report to supporters and opponents of biotechnology alike. But be warned: one section of Straughan’s otherwise splendid document is comically naive. “Stringent regulations have been introduced in those countries where biotechnological developments are taking place,” he says, seeking to reassure us that the existence of prudent controls in a few countries implies similar rigour in all the others. Even Homer nodded.