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## A humanist discussion of... 'nature'

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### "Is it 'Natural'?"

Some people, especially religious believers, oppose scientific and medical developments that involve "tampering with nature" or "playing God". But it could be said that all scientific and medical progress is "playing God"; indeed human beings have been tampering with nature and the environment since prehistoric (and pre-scientific) times.

### Some questions for you to think about

(Answers, and more questions, are on page 3):

- Look around you now. A) Write down everything you see that is "natural"? B) Write down everything you see that is "unnatural"?
- Is "natural" the same as "good"? Try to think of A) natural, but harmful or bad, things, and B) unnatural, but beneficial or good, things.
- Think about the food you eat - how much of it is "natural"? Find out about the cultivation of one simple food, say a carrot or an orange.
- Think about the pets you know - how "natural" are they?
- Would you be alive now if modern medicine did not exist?
- Find out more about a wild place that you know or have read about - a wood, a rain forest, a hill or mountain range, a desert, the sea. How "natural" is it?
- What, if anything, would be wrong about developing (through selective breeding or genetic modification):  
hens that liked being kept in battery cages?  
pigs with organs that could be used for human transplants?  
cows that produced low fat milk with added vitamins?
- How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

### So, how natural is your life?

Because we are part of nature, and have evolved naturally to use our brains, it could be said that everything we think or do is "natural". But your answers to the questions will probably have shown you how little of our lives is natural in the everyday sense of the word. You will probably also have realised that we tamper with nature all the time, and that "natural" and "good" are not necessarily the same thing. When we have to make important decisions about scientific and technological progress, or the environment, or personal or moral

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issues, we need something else to judge by.

Human nature may not have changed a great deal over millions of years, but our culture and our knowledge of the universe have. Sometimes our feelings and attitudes lag behind our knowledge, and we find it difficult to think rationally about new problems. Some developments, such as rapid population growth during the 20th century, environmental problems such as global warming, and new technologies such as genetic engineering, involve moral as well as practical choices. What ought we to do about them? Should we judge these new moral problems by what we think is "natural" or by traditional rules? Or should we be thinking about the consequences for human and animal welfare?

Humanists, who do not believe in gods or religious authority, do not worry about "playing god". They value reason, and knowledge for which there is evidence, such as the discoveries of scientists. Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. Religions tend to look to traditional authorities for their values, which may not have anything relevant to contribute very new ethical debates. Arguments which rely on God or sacred texts are unconvincing to people who do not believe in gods, and humanists do not think that laws should be based on claims which rely on religious faith. Humanists tend to have a scientific outlook on the world, and recognise the huge contribution that science and technology make to our understanding of ourselves and the universe, and to our standard of living. But humanists also recognise that scientific discoveries are not good or bad in themselves - they increase our knowledge of the world, but they do not tell us what we ought to do with that knowledge. Technologists show us how to apply scientific knowledge, but society (and that means us) has to decide whether to apply it.

Because humanists believe that this is the only life we have, they believe in making the best of it. Because they do not believe in supernatural forces that will help humanity to solve its problems, they believe humans must use their knowledge and understanding to solve problems and make life happier. If specific scientific developments (however "unnatural") turn out to be for the good of humanity, then humanists would support them, unless they felt the costs (and this includes environmental and social costs, as well as economic) were too great.

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## **Answers** *(and more questions to think about)*

- List A (human bodies, the sky, trees, birds...) is likely to be much shorter than List B (buildings, clothes, paper products, furniture, domestic animals, garden flowers, food, machinery...). What does this tell you about your life? How well would you manage without all these "unnatural" things?
  - List A) might include viruses, floods, earthquakes, stinging nettles, poisonous berries and snakes... List B) might include a lot of the food you eat, medicines, vaccinations and contraception, dental care and spectacles, school(!), clothes, plumbing, music, ...
  - Unless you grow your own food, using naturally produced seed, and hunt wild animals, very little of what you eat will be natural (even the products labelled "natural" or "organic" are probably highly processed and packaged). Even the simple fruits and vegetables you buy are often grown far from their place of origin, from seed that has been selectively bred, using fertilisers and pesticides to increase yields, and technology to harvest, package and transport them.
  - Most common pets (for example, cats, dogs, rabbits) have been selectively bred for features that we find attractive - fur colour, size, tameness etc. Even our "wilder" pets (for example, fish, tortoises, birds, reptiles) have probably been bred and spent their entire lives in captivity - they would find it hard to fend for themselves in the wild.
  - Have you ever had an operation in hospital? Have you ever had a serious accident? Or perhaps you were born in a hospital, with a lot of help from doctors and nurses? Have you been in contact with a life-threatening disease, for example TB or malaria or whooping cough, but been protected by inoculation?
  - Most wild places have been altered in some way by human beings: we have cleared trees, made roads and paths and hedges, hunted or fished, farmed or planted or grazed animals. Practically all landscapes in Britain, even the ones we think of as most beautiful and natural, have been changed by human activity.
  - To answer these questions you would have to weigh up the effects on human welfare and animal welfare, and on the environment (which affects our welfare). Lists can help, but remember that the longest list may not contain the most important consequences - you still have to use your judgement.
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