

31 ETHICS AND GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOODS¹

Gary Comstock

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, Gary Comstock considers whether it is ethically justified to pursue genetically modified (GM) crops and foods. He first considers intrinsic objections to GM crops that allege that the process of making GMOs is objectionable in itself. He argues that there is no justifiable basis for the objections – i.e. GM crops are not intrinsically ethically problematic. He then considers extrinsic objections to GM crops, including objections based on the precautionary principle, which focus on the potential harms that may result from the adoption of GM organisms. He argues that these concerns have some merit. However, they do not justify giving up GM crops altogether. Instead, they require that GM crops be developed carefully and with appropriate oversight. Comstock then presents the positive case for GM crops that he endorses. It is based on three considerations: (i) the right of people to choose to adopt GM technology; (ii) the balance of likely benefits over harms to consumers and the environment from GM technology; and (iii) the wisdom of encouraging discovery, innovation, and careful regulation of GM technology.

RELATED READINGS

Introduction: Innovation Presumption (2.1); Extrinsic Concerns (2.6); Intrinsic Concerns (2.7); Ethics and Public Policy (2.9); Types of Theories (3.2)

Other Chapters: Jason Robert and Francoise Baylis, *Crossing Species Boundaries* (Ch. 10); Vandana Shiva, *Women and the Gendered Politics of Food* (Ch. 32); Mark A. Bedau and Mark Triant, *Social and Ethical Implications of Creating Artificial Cells* (Ch. 37)

1. INTRODUCTION

Much of the food consumed in the United States (and, increasingly, globally) is genetically modified (GM). GM food derives from microorganisms, plants, or animals manipulated at the molecular level to have traits that farmers or consumers desire. These foods often have been produced by techniques in which “foreign” genes are inserted into the microorganisms, plants, or animals. Foreign genes

¹ This chapter is excerpted from Gary Comstock (2001) ‘Ethics and Genetically Modified Foods,’ *SCOPE* (AAAS). It appears here by permission of the author.

are genes taken from sources other than the organism's natural parents. In other words, GM plants contain genes they would not have contained if researchers had used only traditional plant breeding methods.

Some consumer advocates object to GM foods, and sometimes they object on ethical grounds. When people oppose GM foods on ethical grounds, they typically have some reason for their opposition. We can scrutinize their reasons and, when we do so, we are doing applied ethics. Applied ethics involves identifying peoples' arguments for various conclusions and then analyzing those arguments to determine whether the arguments support their conclusions. A critical goal here is to decide whether an argument is sound. A sound argument is one in which all the premises are true and no mistakes have been made in reasoning.

Ethically justifiable conclusions inevitably rest on two types of claims: (i) empirical claims, or factual assertions about how the world *is*, claims ideally based on the best available scientific observations, principles, and theories; and (ii) normative claims, or value-laden assertions about how the world *ought to be*, claims ideally based on the best available moral judgments, principles, and theories.

Is it ethically justifiable to pursue GM crops and foods? There is an objective answer to this question, and we will try here to figure out what it is.

2. A METHOD FOR ADDRESSING ETHICAL ISSUES

Ethical objections to GM foods typically center on the possibility of harm to persons or other living things. Harm may or may not be justified by outweighing benefits. Whether harms are justified is a question that ethicists try to answer by working methodically through a series of questions:

- (i) What is the harm envisaged? To provide an adequate answer to this question, we must pay attention to how significant the harm or potential harm may be (will it be severe or trivial?); who the "stakeholders" are (that is, who are the persons, animals, even ecosystems, who may be harmed?); the extent to which various stakeholders might be harmed; and the distribution of harms. The last question directs attention to a critical issue, the issue of justice and fairness. Are those who are at risk of being harmed by the action in question different from those who may benefit from the action in question?
- (ii) What information do we have? Sound ethical judgments go hand in hand with a thorough understanding of the scientific facts. In a given case, we may need to ask two questions. Is the scientific information about harm being presented reliable, or is it fact, hearsay, or opinion? What information do we not know that we should know before we make the decision?
- (iii) What are the options? In assessing the various courses of action, emphasize creative problem-solving, seeking to find win-win alternatives in which everyone's interests are protected. Here we must identify what objectives each stakeholder wants to obtain; how many methods are available by which to achieve those objectives; and what advantages and disadvantages attach to each alternative.
- (iv) What ethical principles should guide us? There are at least three secular ethical traditions:

- Rights theory holds that we ought always to act so that we treat human beings as autonomous individuals and not as mere means to an end.
- Utilitarian theory holds that we ought always to act so that we maximize good consequences and minimize harmful consequences.
- Virtue theory holds that we ought always to act so that we act the way a just, fair, good person would act.

Ethical theorists are divided about which of these three theories is best. We manage this uncertainty through the following procedure. Pick one of the three principles. Using it as a basis, determine its implications for the decision at hand. Then, adopt a second principle. Determine what it implies for the decision at hand. Repeat the procedure with the third principle. Should all three principles converge on the same conclusion, then we have good reasons for thinking our conclusion is morally justifiable.

- (v) How do we reach moral closure? Does the decision we have reached allow all stakeholders either to participate in the decision or to have their views represented? If a compromise solution is deemed necessary in order to manage otherwise intractable differences, has the compromise been reached in a way that has allowed all interested parties to have their interests articulated, understood, and considered? If so, then the decision may be justifiable on ethical grounds.

There is a difference between consensus and compromise. Consensus means that the vast majority of people agree about the right answer to a question. If the group cannot reach a consensus but must, nevertheless, make some decision, then a compromise position may be necessary. But neither consensus nor compromise should be confused with the right answer to an ethical question. It is possible that a society might reach a consensus position that is unjust. For example, some societies have held that women should not be allowed to own property. That may be a consensus position or even a compromise position, but it should not be confused with the truth of the matter. Moral closure is a sad fact of life; we sometimes must decide to undertake some course of action even though we know that it may not be, ethically, the right decision, all things considered.

3. ETHICAL ISSUES INVOLVED IN THE USE OF GENETIC TECHNOLOGY IN AGRICULTURE

Discussions of the ethical dimensions of agricultural biotechnology are sometimes confused by a conflation of two quite different sorts of objections to GM technology: intrinsic and extrinsic. It is critical not only that we distinguish these two classes but also that we keep them distinct throughout the ensuing discussion of ethics.

Extrinsic objections focus on the potential harms consequent upon the adoption of GM organisms (GMOs). Extrinsic objections hold that GM technology should not be pursued because of its anticipated results. Briefly stated, the extrinsic objections go as follows. GMOs may have disastrous effects on animals, ecosystems, and humans. Possible harms to humans include perpetuation of

social inequities in modern agriculture, decreased food security for women and children on subsistence farms in developing countries, a growing gap between well-capitalized economies in the northern hemisphere and less capitalized peasant economies in the South, risks to the food security of future generations and the promotion of reductionistic and exploitative science. Potential harms to ecosystems include possible environmental catastrophe; inevitable narrowing of germplasm diversity; and irreversible loss or degradation of air, soils, and waters. Potential harms to animals include unjustified pain to individuals used in research and production.

These are valid concerns, and nation-states must have in place testing mechanisms and regulatory agencies to assess the likelihood, scope, and distribution of potential harms through a rigorous and well-funded risk assessment procedure. However, these extrinsic objections cannot by themselves justify a moratorium, much less a permanent ban, on GM technology, because they admit the possibility that the harms may be minimal and outweighed by the benefits. How can one decide whether the potential harms outweigh potential benefits unless one conducts the research, field tests, and data analysis necessary to make a scientifically informed assessment?

In sum, extrinsic objections to GMOs raise important questions about GMOs, and each country using GMOs ought to have in place the organizations and research structures necessary to ensure their safe use.

There is, however, an entirely different sort of objection to GM technology, a sort of objection that, if it is sound, would justify a permanent ban.

Intrinsic objections allege that the process of making GMOs is objectionable *in itself*. This belief is defended in several ways, but almost all the formulations are related to one central claim, the unnaturalness objection:

(UE) It is unnatural to genetically engineer plants, animals, and foods.

If UE is true, then we ought not to engage in bioengineering, however unfortunate may be the consequences of halting the technology. Were a nation to accept UE as the conclusion of a sound argument, then much agricultural research would have to be terminated and potentially significant benefits from the technology sacrificed. A great deal is at stake.

In *Vexing Nature? On The Ethical Case Against Agricultural Biotechnology*, I discuss 14 ways in which UE has been defended (Comstock, 2000). For present purposes, those 14 objections can be summarized as follows:

- (i) To engage in ag biotech is to *play God*.
- (ii) To engage in ag biotech is to *invent world-changing technology*.
- (iii) To engage in ag biotech is *illegitimately to cross species boundaries*.
- (iv) To engage in ag biotech is to *commodify life*.

Let us consider each claim in turn.

- (i) To engage in ag biotech is to *play God*.

In a western theological framework, humans are creatures, subjects of the Lord of the Universe, and it would be impious for them to arrogate to themselves roles

and powers appropriate only for the Creator. Shifting genes around between individuals and species is taking on a task not appropriate for us, subordinate beings. Therefore, to engage in bioengineering is to play God.

There are several problems with this argument. First, there are different interpretations of God. Absent the guidance of any specific religious tradition, it is logically possible that God could be a Being who wants to turn over to us all divine prerogatives, or explicitly wants to turn over to us at least the prerogative of engineering plants, or who doesn't care what we do. If God is any of these beings, then the argument fails because playing God in this instance is not a bad thing.

The argument seems to assume, however, that God is not like any of the gods just described. Assume that the orthodox Jewish and Christian view of God is correct, that God is the only personal, perfect, necessarily existing, all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful being. On this traditional western theistic view, finite humans should not aspire to infinite knowledge and power. To the extent that bioengineering is an attempt to control nature itself, the argument would go, bioengineering would be an unacceptable attempt to usurp God's dominion.

The problem with this argument is that not all traditional Jews and Christians think this God would rule out genetic engineering. I am a practicing evangelical Christian and the chair of my local church's council. In my tradition, God is thought to endorse creativity and scientific and technological development, including genetic improvement. Other traditions have similar views. In the mystical writings of the Jewish Kabbalah, God is understood as One who expects humans to be co-creators, technicians working with God to improve the world. At least one Jewish philosopher, Baruch Brody, has suggested that biotechnology may be a vehicle ordained by God for the perfection of nature.

I personally hesitate to think that humans can perfect nature. However, I have become convinced that GM might help humans to rectify some of the damage we have already done to nature. And I believe God may endorse such an aim. For humans are made in the divine image. God desires that we exercise the spark of divinity within us. Inquisitiveness in science is part of our nature. Creative impulses are not found only in the literary, musical, and plastic arts. They are part of molecular biology, cellular theory, ecology, and evolutionary genetics, too. It is unclear why the desire to investigate and manipulate the chemical bases of life should not be considered as much a manifestation of our god-like nature as the writing of poetry and the composition of sonatas. As a way of providing theological content for UE, then, argument (i) is unsatisfactory because it is ambiguous and contentious.

- (ii) To engage in ag biotech is to *invent world-changing technology*, an activity that should be reserved to God alone.

Let us consider (ii) in conjunction with a similar objection (iia).

- (iia) To engage in ag biotech is to *arrogate historically unprecedented power to ourselves*.

The argument here is not the strong one, that biotech gives us divine power, but the more modest one, that it gives us a power we have not had previously. But it would be counterintuitive to judge an action wrong simply because it has never been performed. On this view, it would have been wrong to prescribe a new herbal remedy for menstrual cramps or to administer a new anesthetic. But that seems absurd. More argumentation is needed to call historically unprecedented actions morally wrong. What is needed is to know *to what extent* our new powers will transform society, whether we have witnessed prior transformations of this sort, and whether those transitions are morally acceptable.

We do not know how extensive the ag biotech revolution will be, but let us assume that it will be as dramatic as its greatest proponents assert. Have we ever witnessed comparable transitions? The change from hunting and gathering to agriculture was an astonishing transformation. With agriculture came not only an increase in the number of humans on the globe but the first appearance of complex cultural activities: writing, philosophy, government, music, the arts, and architecture. What sort of power did people arrogate to themselves when they moved from hunting and gathering to agriculture? The power of civilization itself (McNeill, 1989).

Ag biotech is often oversold by its proponents. But suppose they are right, that ag biotech brings us historically unprecedented powers. Is this a reason to oppose it? Not if we accept agriculture and its accompanying advances, for when we accepted agriculture we arrogated to ourselves historically unprecedented powers.

In sum, the objections stated in (ii) and (iia) are not convincing.

(iii) To engage in ag biotech is *illegitimately to cross species boundaries*.

The problems with this argument are both theological and scientific. I will leave it to others to argue the scientific case that nature gives ample evidence of generally fluid boundaries between species. The argument assumes that species boundaries are distinct, rigid, and unchanging, but, in fact, species now appear to be messy, plastic, and mutable. To proscribe the crossing of species borders on the grounds that it is unnatural seems scientifically indefensible.

It is also difficult to see how (iii) could be defended on theological grounds. None of the scriptural writings of the western religions proscribes genetic engineering, of course, because genetic engineering was undreamt of when the holy books were written. Now, one might argue that such a proscription may be derived from Jewish or Christian traditions of scriptural interpretation. Talmudic laws against mixing "kinds," for example, might be taken to ground a general prohibition against inserting genes from "unclean" species into clean species. Here's one way the argument might go: For an observant Jew to do what scripture proscribes is morally wrong; Jewish oral and written law proscribe the mixing of kinds (eating milk and meat from the same plate; yoking donkeys and oxen together); bioengineering is the mixing of kinds; therefore, for a Jew to engage in bioengineering is morally wrong.

But this argument fails to show that bioengineering is intrinsically objectionable in all its forms for everyone. The argument might prohibit *Jews* from engaging

in certain *kinds* of biotechnical activity but not all; it would not prohibit, for example, the transferring of genes *within* a species, nor, apparently, the transfer of genes from one clean species to another clean species. Incidentally, it is worth noting that the Orthodox community has accepted transgenesis in its food supply. Seventy percent of cheese produced in the United States is made with a GM product, chymosin. This cheese has been accepted as kosher by Orthodox rabbis (Gressel, 1998).

In conclusion, it is difficult to find a persuasive defense of (iii) on either scientific or religious grounds.

(iv) To engage in ag biotech is to *commodify life*.

The argument here is that genetic engineering treats life in a reductionistic manner, reducing living organisms to little more than machines. Life is sacred and not to be treated as a good of commercial value only to be bought and sold to the highest bidder.

Could we apply this principle uniformly? Would not objecting to the products of GM technology on these grounds also require that we object to the products of ordinary agriculture on the same grounds? Is not the very act of bartering or exchanging crops and animals for cash vivid testimony to the fact that every culture on earth has engaged in the commodification of life for centuries? If one accepts commercial trafficking in non-GM wheat and pigs, then why object to commercial trafficking in GM wheat and GM pigs? Why should it be wrong to treat DNA the way we have previously treated animals, plants, and viruses (Nelkin and Lindee, 1999)?

Although (iv) may be true, it is not a sufficient reason to object to GM technology because our values and economic institutions have long accepted the commodification of life. Now, one might object that various religious traditions have never accepted commodification and that genetic engineering presents us with an opportunity to resist, to reverse course. Kass (1998), for example, has argued that we have gone too far down the road of dehumanizing ourselves and treating nature as a machine and that we should pay attention to our emotional reactions against practices such as human cloning. Even if we cannot defend these feelings in rational terms, our revulsion at the very idea of cloning humans should carry great weight. Midgley (2000) has argued that moving genes across species boundaries is not only "yukky" but, perhaps, a monstrous idea, a form of playing God.

Kass (1988) and Midgley (2000) have eloquently defended the relevance of our emotional reactions to genetic engineering but, as both admit, we cannot simply allow our emotions to carry the day. As Midgley writes, "Attention to ... sympathetic feelings [can stir] up reasoning that [alters] people's whole world view" (p. 10). But as much hinges on the reasoning as on the emotions.

Are the intrinsic objections sound? Are they clear, consistent, and logical? Do they rely on principles we are willing to apply uniformly to other parts of our lives? Might they lead to counterintuitive results?

Counterintuitive results are results we strongly hesitate to accept because they run counter to widely shared considered moral intuitions. If a moral rule or principle leads to counterintuitive results, then we have a strong reason to reject it. For

example, consider the following moral principle, which we might call the doctrine of naive consequentialism (NC):

(NC) Always improve the welfare of the most people.

Were we to adopt NC, then we would be not only permitted but required to sacrifice one healthy person if by doing so we could save many others. If six people need organ transplants (two need kidneys, one needs a liver, one needs a heart, and two need lungs) then NC instructs us to sacrifice the life of the healthy person to transplant six organs to the other six. But this result, that we are *obliged* to sacrifice innocent people to save strangers, is wildly counterintuitive. This result gives us a strong reason to reject NC.

I have argued that the four formulations of the unnaturalness objection considered above are unsound insofar as they lead to counterintuitive results. I do not take this position lightly. Twelve years ago, I wrote "The Case Against bGH," an article, I have been told, that "was one of the first papers by a philosopher to object to ag biotech on explicitly ethical grounds." I then wrote a series of other articles objecting to GM herbicide-resistant crops, transgenic animals, and, indeed, all of ag biotech (see, Comstock, 1988). I am acquainted with worries about GM foods. But, for reasons that include the weakness of the intrinsic objections, I have changed my mind. The sympathetic feelings on which my anti-GMO worldview was based did not survive the stirring up of reasoning.

4. WHY ARE WE CAREFUL WITH GM FOODS?

I do not pretend to know anything like the full answer to this question, but I would like to be permitted the luxury of a brief speculation about it. The reason may have to do with a natural, completely understandable, and wholly rational tendency to take precautions with what goes into our mouths. When we are in good health and happy with the foods available to us, we have little to gain from experimenting with new food and no reason to take a chance on a potentially unsafe food. We may think of this disposition as the precautionary response.

When faced with two contrasting opinions about issues related to food safety, consumers place great emphasis on negative information. The precautionary response is particularly strong when a consumer sees little to gain from a new food technology.

When a given food is plentiful, it is rational to place extra weight on negative information about any particular piece of that food. It is rational to do so, as my colleague Dermot Hayes points out, even when the source of the negative information is known to be biased.

There are several reasons for us to take a precautionary approach to new foods. First, under conditions in which nutritious tasty food is plentiful, we have nothing to gain from trying a new food if, from our perspective, it is in other respects identical to our current foods. Suppose on a rack in front of me there are 18 dozen maple-frosted Krispy Kreme doughnuts, all baked to a golden brown, all weighing three ounces. If I am invited to take one of them, I have no reason to favor one over the other.

Suppose, however, that a naked man runs into the room with wild-hair flying behind him yelling that the sky is falling. He approaches the rack and points at the third doughnut from the left on the fourth shelf from the bottom. He exclaims, "This doughnut will cause cancer! Avoid it at all costs, or die!" There is no reason to believe this man's claim and yet, because there are so many doughnuts freely available, why should we take any chances? It is rational to select other doughnuts, because all are alike. Now, perhaps one of us is a mountain climber who loves taking risks and might be tempted to say, "Heck, I'll try that doughnut." In order to focus on the right question here, the risk takers should ask themselves whether they would select the tainted doughnut to take home to feed to their 2-year-old daughter. Why impose any risk on your loved ones when there is no reason to do so?

The Krispy Kreme example is meant to suggest that food tainting is both a powerful and an extraordinarily easy social act. It is powerful because it virtually determines consumer behavior. It is easy, because the tainter does not have to offer any evidence of the food's danger. Under conditions of food plenty, rational consumers do and should take precautions, avoiding tainted food no matter how untrustworthy the tainter.

Our tendency to take precautions with our food suggests that a single person with a negative view about GM foods will be much more influential than many people with a positive view (Hayes et. al, in press).

In a worldwide context, the precautionary response of those facing food abundance in developed countries may lead us to be insensitive to the conditions of those in less fortunate situations. Indeed, we may find ourselves in the following ethical dilemma.

For purposes of argument, make the following three assumptions. (I do not believe any of the assumptions is implausible.) First, assume that GM food is safe. Second, assume that some GM "orphan" foods, such as rice enhanced with iron or vitamin A, or virus-resistant cassava, or aluminum-tolerant sweet potato, may be of great potential benefit to millions of poor children. Third, assume that widespread anti-GM information and sentiment, no matter how unreliable on scientific grounds, could shut down the GM infrastructure in the developed world.

Under these assumptions, consider the possibility that, by tainting GM foods in the countries best suited to conduct GM research safely, anti-GM activists could bring to a halt the range of money-making GM foods marketed by multinational corporations. This result might be a good or a bad thing. However, an unintended side effect of this consequence would be that the new GM orphan crops mentioned above might not be forthcoming, assuming that the development and commercialization of these orphan crops depends on the answering of fundamental questions in plant science and molecular biology that will be answered only if the research agendas of private industry are allowed to go forward along with the research agendas of public research institutions.

Our precautionary response to new food may put us in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, we want to tell "both sides" of the GM story, letting people know about the benefits and the risks of the technology. On the other hand, some of the people touting the benefits of the technology make outlandish claims that it will feed the world and some of the people decrying the technology

make unsupported claims that it will ruin the world. In that situation, however, those with unsupported negative stories to tell carry greater weight than those with unsupported positive stories. Our precautionary response, then, may well lead, in the short term at least, to the rejection of GM technology. Yet, the rejection of GM technology could indirectly harm those children most in need, those who need what I have called the orphan crops.

Are we being forced to choose between two fundamental values, the value of free speech versus the value of children's lives?

On the one hand, open conversation and transparent decision-making processes are critical to the foundations of a liberal democratic society. We must reach out to include everyone in the debate and allow people to state their opinions about GM foods, whatever their opinion happens to be and whatever their level of acquaintance with the science and technology happens to be. Free speech is a value not to be compromised lightly.

On the other hand, stating some opinions about GM food can clearly have a tainting effect, a powerful and extraordinarily easy consequence of free speech. Tainting the technology might result in the loss of this potentially useful tool. Should we, then, draw some boundaries around the conversation, insisting that each contributor bring some measure of scientific data to the table, especially when negative claims are being made? Or are we collectively prepared to leave the conversation wide open? That is, in the name of protecting free speech, are we prepared to risk losing an opportunity to help some of the world's most vulnerable?

5. THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

As a thirteen year-old, I won my dream job, wrangling horses at Honey Rock Camp in northern Wisconsin. The image I cultivated for myself was the weathered cowboy astride Chief or Big Red, dispensing nuggets to awestruck young rider wannabes. But I was, as they say in Texas, all hat. "Be careful!" was the best advice I could muster.

Only after years of experience in a western saddle would I have the skills to size up various riders and advise them properly on a case-by-case basis. You should slouch more against the cantle and get the balls of your feet onto the stirrups. You need to thrust your heels in front of your knees and down toward the animal's front hooves. You! Roll your hips in rhythm with the animal, and stay away from the horn. You, stay alert for sudden changes of direction.

Only after years of experience with hundreds of different riders would I realize that my earlier generic advice, well-intentioned though it was, had been of absolutely no use to anyone. As an older cowboy once remarked, I might as well have been saying, "Go crazy!" Both pieces of advice were equally useless in making good decisions about how to behave on a horse.

Now, concerned observers transfer fears to genetically modified foods, advising: "Take precaution!" Is this a valuable observation that can guide specific public policy decisions, or well-intentioned but ultimately unhelpful advice?

As formulated in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the precautionary principle states that "... lack of full scientific certainty shall

not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation." The precautionary approach has led many countries to declare a moratorium on GM crops on the supposition that developing GM crops might lead to environmental degradation. The countries are correct that this is an implication of the principle. But is it the only implication?

Suppose global warming intensifies and comes, as some now darkly predict, to interfere dramatically with food production and distribution. Massive dislocations in international trade and corresponding political power follow global food shortages, affecting all regions and nations. In desperate attempts to feed themselves, billions begin to pillage game animals, clear-cut forests to plant crops, cultivate previously non-productive lands, apply fertilizers and pesticides at higher than recommended rates, kill and eat endangered and previously non-endangered species.

Perhaps this is not a likely scenario, but it is not entirely implausible either. GM crops could help to prevent it, by providing hardier versions of traditional lines capable of growing in drought conditions, or in saline soils, or under unusual climactic stresses in previously temperate zones, or in zones in which we have no prior agronomic experience.

On the supposition that we might need the tools of genetic engineering to avert future episodes of crushing human attacks on what Aldo Leopold called "the land," the precautionary principle requires that we develop GM crops. Yes, we lack full scientific certainty that developing GM crops will prevent environmental degradation. True, we do not know what the final financial price of GM research and development will be. But if GM technology were to help save the land, few would not deem that price cost-effective. So, according to the precautionary principle, lack of full scientific certainty that GM crops will prevent environmental degradation shall not be used as a reason for postponing this potentially cost-effective measure.

The precautionary principle commits us to each of the following propositions:

- (1) We must not develop GM crops.
- (2) We must develop GM crops.

As (1) and (2) are plainly contradictory, however, defenders of the principle should explain why its implications are not incoherent.

Much more helpful than the precautionary principle would be detailed case-by-case recommendations crafted upon the basis of a wide review of nonindustry-sponsored field tests conducted by objective scientists expert in the construction and interpretation of ecological and medical data. Without such a basis for judging this use acceptable and that use unacceptable, we may as well advise people in the GM area to go crazy. It would be just as helpful as "Take precaution!"

6. RELIGION AND ETHICS

Religious traditions provide an answer to the question, "How, overall, should I live my life?" Secular ethical traditions provide an answer to the question, "What is

the right thing to do?" When in a pluralistic society a particular religion's answers come into genuine conflict with the answers arrived at through secular ethical deliberation, we must ask how deep is the conflict. If the conflict is so deep that honoring the religion's views would entail dishonoring another religion's views, then we have a difficult decision to make. In such cases, the conclusions of secular ethical deliberation must override the answers of the religion in question.

The reason is that granting privileged status to one religion will inevitably discriminate against another religion. Individuals must be allowed to follow their conscience in matters theological. But if one religion is allowed to enforce its values on others in a way that restricts the others' ability to pursue their values, then individual religious freedom has not been protected.

Moral theorists refer to this feature of nonreligious ethical deliberation as the *overridingness* of ethics. If a parent refuses a life-saving medical procedure for a minor child on religious grounds, the state is justified in overriding the parent's religious beliefs in order to protect what secular ethics regards as a value higher than religious freedom: the life of a child.

The overridingness of ethics applies to our discussion only if a religious group claims the right to halt GM technology on purely religious grounds. The problem here is the confessional problem of one group attempting to enforce its beliefs on others. I mean no disrespect to religion; as I have noted, I am a religious person, and I value religious traditions other than my own. Religious traditions have been the repositories and incubators of virtuous behavior. Yet each of our traditions must, in a global society, learn to coexist peacefully with competing religions and with nonreligious traditions and institutions.

If someone objects to GM technology on purely religious grounds, we must ask on what authority they speak for their tradition, whether there are other, conflicting, views within their tradition and whether acting on their views will entail disrespecting the views of people from other religions. It is, of course, the right of each tradition to decide its attitude about genetic engineering. But in the absence of other good reasons, we must not allow someone to ban GM technology for narrowly sectarian reasons alone. To allow such an action would be to disrespect the views of people who believe, on equally sincere religious grounds, that GM technology is not necessarily inconsistent with God's desires for us.

7. CONCLUSION

Earlier I described a method for reaching ethically sound judgments. It was on the basis of that method that I personally came to change my mind about the moral acceptability of GM crops. My opinion changed as I took full account of three considerations: (i) the rights of people in various countries to choose to adopt GM technology (a consideration falling under the human rights principle); (ii) the balance of likely benefits over harms to consumers and the environment from GM technology (a utilitarian consideration); and (iii) the wisdom of encouraging discovery, innovation, and careful regulation of GM technology (a consideration related to virtue theory).

Is it ethically justifiable to pursue GM crops and foods? I have come to believe that three of our most influential ethical traditions converge on a common answer. Assuming we proceed responsibly and with appropriate caution, the answer is yes.

WORKS CITED

- B. Brody, private communication.
- G. Comstock (1988) 'The case against bGH,' *Agricultural and Human Values*, 5:36-52.
- G. Comstock (2000) *Vexing Nature? On the Ethical Case Against Agricultural Biotechnology* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- D. Hayes, J. Fox, and J. Shogren (In press) 'Consumer preferences for food irradiation: how favorable and unfavorable descriptions affect preferences for irradiated pork in experimental auctions,' *J. Risk Uncertainty*.
- L. Kass (1998) 'Beyond biology: Will advances in genetic technology threaten to dehumanize us all?' *The New York Times on the Web*, online at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/08/23/reviews/980823.23kassct.html>
- L. Kass (1998) *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (New York, NY: The Free Press).
- W. McNeill (1989) 'Gains and losses: an historical perspective on farming,' *The 1989 Iowa Humanities Lecture* (National Endowment for the Humanities and Iowa Humanities Board, Oakdale Campus, Iowa City, IA).
- M. Midgley (2000) 'Biotechnology and monstrosity: Why we should pay attention to the 'yuk factor,' *Hastings Center Report*, 30(5): 7-15.
- D. Nelkin, and M. S. Lindee (1995) *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as Cultural Icon* (Ann Arbor, M.I.: University of Michigan).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author argues that under certain circumstances religious concerns should be discounted or disregarded. What role do you think religious ethics should play in decisions about public policy (i.e. regulation and funding) of controversial technologies?
2. The author argues that the intrinsic objections against agricultural biotechnology are unsound? Do you agree with this assessment? What are your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing?
3. What is the basis of the author's rejection of the precautionary principle? Is there a way for formulate the precautionary principle so that it is not subject to the problems he raises for it?
4. The author argues that developed nations' failure to pursue GM crops might come at a cost to people of the developing world. What are his reasons for thinking this? Do you think they are strong reasons?
5. As the author notes, many people have an adverse reaction to genetically modified foods. What role should those reactions play in our ethical deliberations?
6. Do you find the considerations the author presents in favor of GM crops to be compelling? Why or why not?
7. Can you think of any objections to GM crops that are not addressed by the author in this chapter?