

Is repugnance wise? Visceral responses to biotechnology

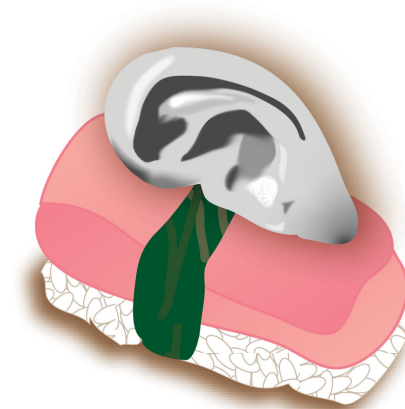
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I still remember the first time someone invited me to try sushi. Yuk! Raw fish, I thought. How disgusting. An enlightened person would next proceed to tell you how he or she overcame this initial revulsion and learned to love *Oshizushi* and *Nigiri*. Sadly, I am not that person. Sushi still seems pretty yucky to me, though I concede belonging to a small and diminishing minority. When I go to a Japanese restaurant, I order the beef teriyaki. "You still eat beef?" I can hear someone saying with horror. Yuk!

Disgust is not a particularly discerning, reflective reaction. Disgust is visceral, immediate, and remarkably powerful. Something truly repugnant can make you vomit or turn away in disgust. Many of us cannot look at a crushed animal on the roadside without feeling queasy and repulsed.

While many individuals are disinclined to link a sense of disgust to the study of ethical issues in biotech, several scholars attend to the moral significance of revulsion. Mary Midgley, for example, is the author of *Biotechnology and Monstrosity: Why We Should Pay Attention to the 'Yuk Factor'*.¹ Leon Kass, Chairman of The President's Council on Bioethics in the United States, is the author of *The Wisdom of Repugnance: Why We Should Ban the Cloning of Humans*,

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Feeling hungry? Certain products of biotech are not palatable to everyone.

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a widely cited critique of reproductive cloning of humans². Exploring the ethics of human cloning, Kass writes:

We are repelled by the prospect of cloning human beings not because of the strangeness or novelty of the undertaking, but because we intuit and feel, immediately and without argument, the violation of things that we rightfully hold dear. Repugnance, here as elsewhere, revolts against the excesses of human willfulness, warning us not to transgress what is unspeakably profound. Indeed, in this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, in which our given human nature no longer commands respect, in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational wills, repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.

Kass and Midgley make some important points in their work. When our initial reac-

tion to something is one of immediate, visceral disgust, we will often have reason to attend carefully to these intimations. Kass and Midgley make a sensible claim: moral deliberation is not just a hyperintellectual enterprise of identifying logical fallacies and cool ratiocination. There are, however, two very large problems with attending to the 'yuk factor' or the 'wisdom of repugnance.' When we recognize these pitfalls, we can see the perils of developing arguments and crafting laws on the basis of a sense of 'repugnance.'

First, proponents of the 'wisdom of repugnance' expend a lot of words discussing how 'we' feel. 'We' find this or that phenomenon repulsive. 'We' experience a visceral sense of disgust when confronted with various biotechnologies. However, Kass, Midgley, and other proponents of the wisdom of repugnance do a miserable job of demonstrating that there is a common 'we' experiencing shared visceral reactions to various biotechnologies. There is no uniform 'we' experiencing shared reactions to *in vitro* fertilization, genetic testing, prenatal diagnosis, and embryonic stem cell research. Rather, there are very different ways of responding to such technologies. One problem with drawing upon the wisdom of repugnance is that many citizens simply do not have the assumed response of revulsion to particular biotechnologies. The rhetorical use of 'we' conceals the diverse moral understandings found in multicultural, multifaith liberal democracies. Often, biotechnologies generate variable responses. Some individuals are appalled at the very notion of creating genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Studies demonstrating the safety of GMOs will not change their minds. It is the phenomenon of GMOs that they find repugnant. Other

individuals have no such reaction. Rather, many individuals are supportive of creating GMOs. They see developments in agbiotech addressing important health and nutrition problems.

Second, perhaps a more important problem with drawing upon the 'wisdom' of repugnance is that reactions of disgust are often built upon prejudices that should be challenged and rebutted rather than regarded as sources of moral insight. For example, in the United States, many individuals have thought—and some doubtless still think—that there is nothing more disgusting than a black man having an intimate emotional, sexual, and intellectual relationship with a white woman, or a white man having such a relationship with a black woman. Racists opposed to such social relations are quick to invoke the language of moral transgression, abomination, repugnance, boundary violations, and transgressions of 'nature.'

Just as some individuals confuse racism with moral perceptiveness, many individuals think there is nothing more disgusting

than the prospect of a man having as a partner another man or a woman partnering with another woman. While some individuals support gay rights and gay marriages, other individuals react with

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revulsion and disgust. They see no need to provide arguments for their views. They think everyone should react with the same sense of repugnance.

We should thus be wary about equating visceral reactions of revulsion with moral

wisdom. Sometimes, disgust and repugnance are better recognized as ignorance, prejudice, and discrimination. Instead of regarding such reactions as displaying moral wisdom, they are better regarded as revealing deep-rooted prejudices that deserve to be unmasked, challenged, and rebutted.

There are instances where initial reactions of uncertainty, fear, and disgust deserve to be heeded. Occasionally, there are intimations of wisdom in reactions of repugnance. But there are as many instances where reactions of repugnance are more thoughtfully recognized as responses of prejudice and ignorance, reflecting our crudest convictions. Rather than celebrating such visceral responses, we should be on guard when we have such reactions. Labeling particular biotechnologies as intuitively 'yucky' or 'repugnant' does not make a particularly useful contribution to public ethical debate.

1. Midgley, M. *Hastings Center Report* 30, 7–15 (2000).
2. Kass, L. *The New Republic* 17–26 (June 2, 1997).