Chapter 2
Philosophical Approaches to Nature

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2.1 Introduction

“Do we have the ethical resources to use our genetic powers wisely and humanely? … Do existing ethical theories, concepts, and principles provide the materials for constructing more adequate instruments for moral navigation?” These questions posed at the outset of *From Chance to Choice* go to the heart of the whole project upon which we are embarked. Its authors observe that “even if we were more assured than we should be that our technical control will be complete, we would continue to wonder whether we will be able to distinguish between what we can do and what we ought to do.” They resolve that “something more is needed. A systematic vision of the moral character of the world we hope to be moving toward is required” (Buchanan et al., 2000, 4).

What philosophical resources can be brought to bear upon the choices, social and personal, that innovations in biotechnology will be forcing upon us imminently and with unprecedented gravity? The first place to turn would be explicit moral philosophies currently invoked and asserted both theoretically and in practice. Two types – utilitarian and deontological – dominate current usage. But the tacit premise of this entire research project is that such explicit ethical theorizing, confronted with the challenges of the new biotechnologies, may require substantial supplementation when the public policy controversy reaches full tide. When fundamental issues of this gravity present themselves in the public policy arena, it has been conspicuous that established religious commitments have been called into play. This is due not only to the traditional authority religious communities may exercise upon their adherents, but also, and as one basis of that authority, to the metaphysical grounding of ethical judgments in a more comprehensive, explicitly theoretical as well as evaluative, conception of humankind’s place in the world. In that light, what resources – normative resources – can the philosophical discourse on nature supply? In this chapter we wish to consider what modern philosophical thought might provide in the way of connection or grounding for ethics via conceptions of nature and humankind’s participation in that nature – including, but not restricted to, the notion of a “human nature.” We do not believe that any one definitive philosophical position can be identified that would resolve the issues facing contemporary
culture, but rather that a variety of historical and contemporary approaches bring mutually contesting views which will need to be negotiated and elected in the ongoing debates.

It appears that in modern Western thought the philosophical resources available by taking nature as a normative principle have sharply diminished. Not only has the recourse to such metaphysical grounding become vanishingly thin in contemporary ethical thought, but conversely ethical concerns appear quite insubstantial against the forward lurch of science and technology as a project of instrumental mastery of the world. With regard to ethical connections, our obliviousness rooted in a confining expertise, what Veblen once called our “trained incapacity,” may indeed have been the price of our scientific-technical facility. Radical impoverishment of ethical purchase manifests itself even as we come to face some of the most staggering ethical choices in our species and planetary history. Alasdair MacIntyre has drawn the starkest conclusion: “There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture,” he wrote in 1981 (MacIntyre, 1984, 6). That is, “rival premises are such that we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another” (8). Worse, in his view, it has become commonplace to believe that “all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference,” and “agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none” (12).

In one of the paradigm statements of the modern Western worldview, Max Weber asserted that an “ethic of ultimate ends apparently must go to pieces on the problem of the justification of means by ends,” for “the proponent of an ethic of absolute ends cannot stand up under the ethical irrationality of the world” (Weber, 1946, 122). This “ethical irrationality” is the simple consequence of a new science by which “the world is disenchanted” (139). The world of ethics is sundered from the world of knowledge: “increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives” (139). If the question is What shall we do and how shall we live? then, Weber replies: “That science does not give an answer to this question is indisputable” (143). Instead and exclusively, “science contributes to the technology of controlling life by calculating external objects as well as man’s activities” (150). As MacIntyre aptly summarizes, Weber concludes that “questions of ends are questions of values, and on value reason is silent; conflict between rival values cannot be rationally settled. Instead one must simply choose” (MacIntyre, 1984, 26).

An abyss – between is and ought, between science and ethics – began to open up with and through the emergence of modern Western philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the epoch of the “Scientific Revolution” and the Enlightenment. The modern West gradually enshrined “a novel conception of science: … a type of understanding which stands apart from all value-judgment and value-determination” (Leiss, 1972, 109). The way of understanding (and manipulating) nature became disengaged utterly from any normative restraint grounded in such an understanding. That abyss between science and ethics remains at the core of contemporary science and technology, notwithstanding the sea-change that has occurred in the theory of the world, and perhaps even in the idea of “scientific method.” in the interval. It behooves us to reckon with the power of the image of a