
Paul Thompson’s *Food Biotechnology in Ethical Perspective* is a systematic and thoughtful examination of the diverse ethical issues that arise in the context of food biotechnology, from food safety to the effects on developing nations, as well as of broader issues concerning the challenges these pose for policy, and attendant issues concerning the relation between science and society.

This book is not an introduction for readers who need to be made aware of the technologies and practices that raise these ethical issues. Nor is it a survey or history of the relevant policy matters, court decisions, or controversies. Rather, it takes a representative sample of these issues and controversies, and the public debate that has ensued, and analyzes the various ethical arguments that have been given.

In doing so, it illustrates ethical reasoning about a number of particular issues, but it also steps back more broadly: surveying the relevant ethical theories and judging which are to be the most helpful, identifying underlying presuppositions, and, as will be detailed below, illustrating how philosophical reflection can be valuable at a number of levels.

But while Thompson’s book provides here a detailed and by no means superficial examination of the ethical issues, it does not get lost in philosophical abstraction inaccessible to his intended audience – scientists, policy makers, and well-informed readers who want to properly understand and to take part in the public discussion about food biotechnology. Thompson hopes thereby to raise the level of public discussion, both by enticing more people into genuine debate and by providing them the tools and insights to discuss at a careful and more sophisticated level.

He uses a wide variety of examples, but examines the controversy over rBST (recombinant bovine somatotropin), a synthetic version of a naturally occurring hormone injected into cows to increase their milk production, as a case to come back to again and again to illustrate a range
Thompson first makes the “presumptive case” for food biotechnology, based on such things as its potential to enable increased productivity, improvement in food quality, and safety and environmental quality. He also shows why a number of arguments often put forward by proponents and practitioners involve fallacies (such as the “modernist fallacy” and the “naturalistic fallacy”) and need to be avoided.

The rest of the book considers criticisms and ethical issues that have been raised. The basic ethical concerns, of course, involve various “unintended consequences,” which can be divided into consequences for food safety and thus human health, consequences for non-human animal health and welfare, environmental consequences, and “social consequences” (involving economic, political, or other social institutions, and including questions of distributive justice). Each of these is dealt with in subsequent chapters.

Thompson also takes up (in separate chapters) a detailed examination of the arguments based on intellectual property rights and the ownership of life, and those based on religious and metaphysical claims, such as “Playing God” and acceptance of limits.

Concerning all of these topics, there are contentious issues, recurrent themes, and potential stumbling blocks, and there has been over the past several years a sizable and growing literature on their ethical analysis, coming from different perspectives. The animal welfare controversy has been addressed via utilitarian views and rights views, with debate about the nature of rights and the requirements for their possession. These have played off each other, and alternative conceptualizations have been put forward, such as the telos of an animal. The environmental debate has involved such issues as whether non-sentient objects like ecosystems or species can have some sort of value independent of their instrumental value for sentient beings, and whether such conceptions as virtue or stewardship can aid us in our thinking about our responsibilities concerning the environment.

In each case, Thompson summarizes important literature and typically goes beyond it in a way that engages the philosophical issues and yet also utilizes relevance to public policy as one criterion of adequacy. For example, in the case of animal welfare, he provides a useful critique of Rollin’s use of the concept of “telos,” which Rollin has used to find a way to think about a standard for assessing how animals are to be treated.

But there are various ways in which the book goes beyond these individual analyses, by stepping back and addressing such broad topics as...