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Kirkham, Georgiana, "'Playing God' and 'Vexing Nature': A Cultural Perspective"

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In this paper I examine the twin concepts of "playing God," and its secular equivalent that which I term for the purpose of this discussion "vexing Nature" as they relate to arguments against (or for) certain human technological actions and behaviors. While noting the popular subscription to the notion that certain acts constitute instances of "playing God" or interfering in the natural order, philosophers often deny that such phrases have any application to the central ethical issues in the areas where they are most commonly applied. I examine, in detail, the interpretations of these phrases put forward by bio-ethicists Ruth Chadwick and John Harris and argue that the concepts "playing God" and "vexing nature" are best understood as an expression of a moral intuition that is both significant and deserving of serious philosophical attention. My contention is that intuitions of this kind often express a concern for the virtue of, and doubt about the intentions of, the agent whose acts are described in these terms, and that these concepts are best understood as part of an historical and cultural continuum specific to the Western tradition. Understood as such, this indicates that debate continues over the purpose of art and technology, and the place of humanity within the natural environment, and that a kind of traditional teleological virtue ethics still exerts a significant influence on popular conceptions of the moral issues underlying this debate.
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